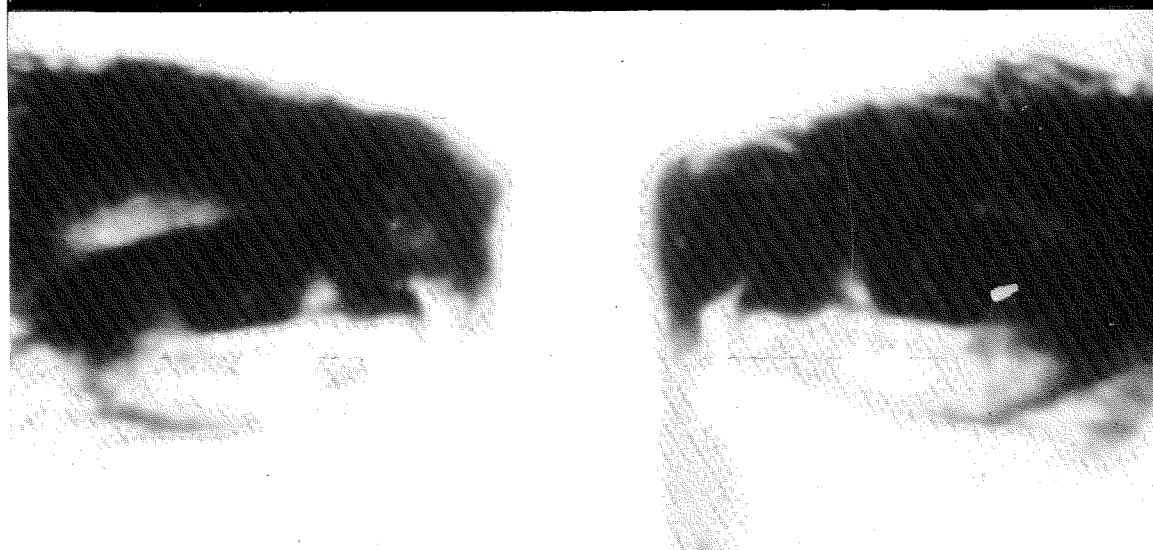


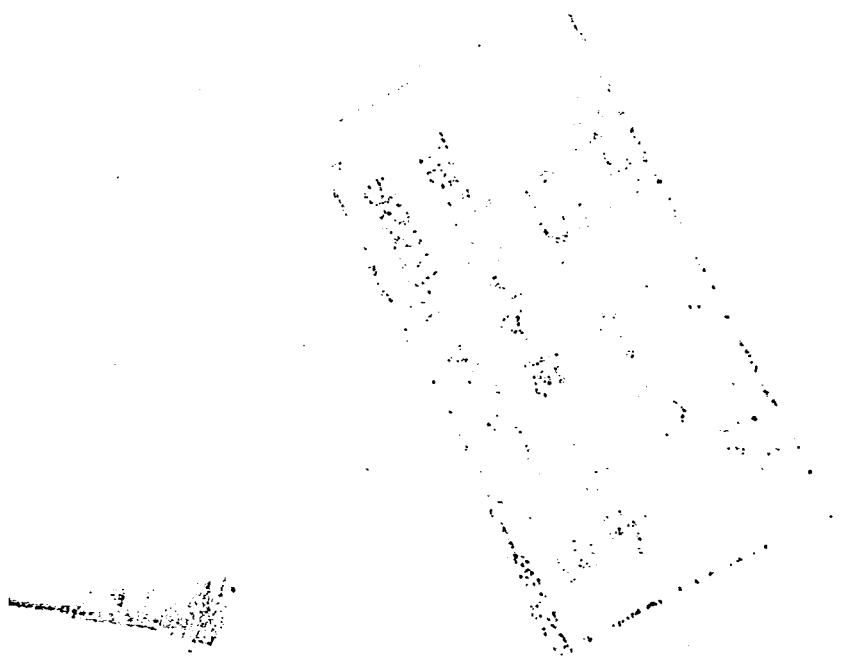
Volume 25 Number 2 March-April 1984 \$7.00

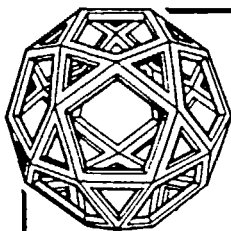
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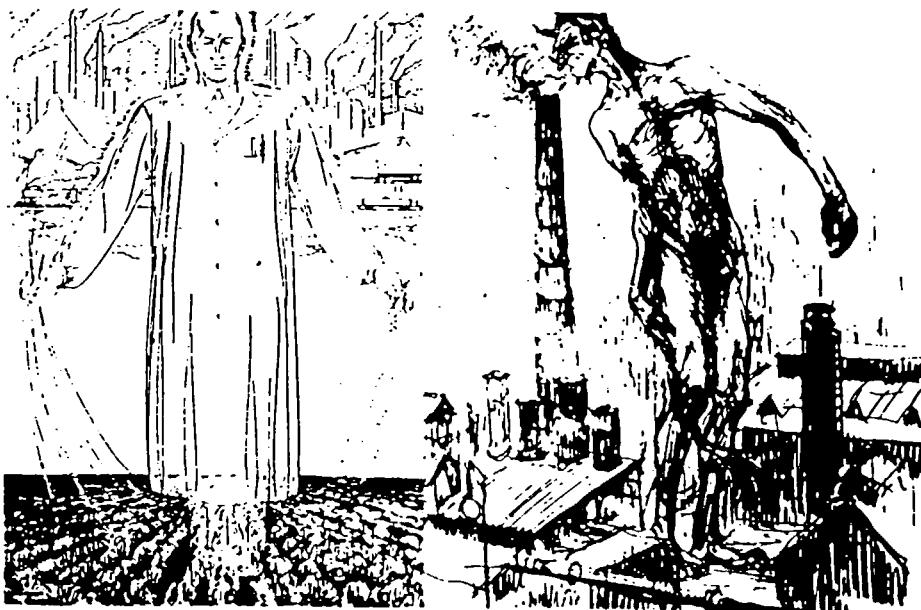
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CHANNEL 4— ONE YEAR ON

EIGHT PROGRAMME-MAKERS FOR BRITAIN'S 'INNOVATIVE' BROADCASTING INITIATIVE DISCUSS ITS FIRST YEAR

IN NOVEMBER 1983, Channel 4 completed a year of broadcasting. Within that brief time it has clearly shifted its original profile and permanently affected the whole of TV ecology. To 'celebrate' this anniversary, we brought together a group of people associated with Channel 4 productions in various capacities, to discuss these developments. Half the participants were associated with *Screen*, half weren't. A symptom of the problems we went on to discuss was that several people invited felt so insecure in their relation to the Channel that they declined to participate.

The participants were JOHN ELLIS (JE), producer of the *Visions* cinema programmes from Large Door Limited; BARRY FLYNN (BF), a senior journalist on *The Friday Alternative* weekly news programme from Diverse Productions; CARL GARDNER (CG), a researcher on the *Voices* discussion series from Brook Productions; MANDY MERCK (MM), editor of *Screen*, who helped organise a series of women's films for *The Eleventh Hour* series; JULIE SHEPPARD (JS), a freelance TV researcher who has worked on several Channel 4 productions including the science series *Crucible* from Central Television; ROD STONEMAN (RS), director of *Ireland: The Silent Voices* and now Channel 4 Assistant Commissioning Editor for Independent Film; JOHN WYVER (JW), a researcher/producer with the Illuminations production company, which specialises in arts programming; and ANON, a woman producer for the Channel who doesn't wish to be identified.

Channel 4 and Innovation: The Promise and the Limits

JE: We should be asking questions about the kind of product that Channel 4 was getting, is getting, and is looking for in the future. Does it seriously want to sustain for itself an independent sector at all? All the signs are against it. They're making all these speeches about how they're doubtful about whether independents can survive on income from Channel 4 alone. And we should also ask questions about the early ideology of Channel 4 and the kind of collective euphoria it was set up with. How did people on the left get themselves in the position where they believed that?

RS: I'm going to play devil's advocate to your questions. Because old hacks of the independent (ie grant-aided) film sector knew from the very beginning that the word 'independent' never had anything to do with autonomy, especially not economic autonomy. It always meant negotiating certain structures of power and decision-making, because no one ever gave anyone money to make films (even the British Film Institute (BFI), the Regional Arts Associations and those limited sources of funding) without putting them through the necessary application procedures, supervisory procedures and finally taking away most of the rights and financial repayments at the end. But certain in-roads were made – the effects of the Independent Filmmakers' Association (IFA) campaigns with the BFI Production Board was one notable gain in this area. Obviously there are greater and lesser degrees of autonomy involved, but I'm afraid you might be positing some kind of autonomy which is just utopian.

CG: I would have thought that the euphoria about Channel 4 in the original instance consisted primarily of a notion that people would be able to say the sort of things on Channel 4 that were not being said on the other channels. Now, with the recent spate of overt censorship, it seems to me that's one of the major things one can question. Secondly there was a belief, particularly amongst those people coming out of mainstream television, that they would in general be working free from the ossified, bureaucratic, established structures afflicting the rest of TV. Now in a sense what's happened is that we're back in a new set of structures. We're working to a completely attenuated, unaccountable commissioning process inside the Channel. At least the relations of power and decision-making inside most ITV (Independent Television) companies are pretty transparent. Now they've become much more opaque and unidentifiable than they ever were inside those companies. Those are the two hopes that brought about the euphoria and both of them have been loudly shown to have extreme limitations.

JE: I think there was an absolute belief that you would be able to say on Channel 4 what you could say in the written press – not just the *Daily* and *Sunday* newspapers but also in magazines like the *New Statesman*. It's that belief which has been much eroded over the last year.

BF: But it's my understanding that the people who actually held that belief in the beginning were people like Jeremy Isaacs¹ and Liz Forgan.² The independent producers who debated this through with them at the beginning of the first year of Channel 4 said 'Come on, aren't the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) going to rebel against this notion right from the very beginning?' And Jeremy Isaacs and Liz Forgan were convinced they could get away with it. So the belief on the left or amongst radical programme-makers that this would be a genuine opportunity for 'independence' was by and large fostered by the Channel. It wasn't a naive piece of utopianism

JE: But why did we believe it? Why did we fall for it?

JS: Well, we all got jobs working in it. I came quite late to the Channel 4 debate and the sorts of predictions about what its commissioning policy was going to be were much more pessimistic than it actually turned out

¹ Channel 4 Chief Executive.

² Senior Commissioning Editor for News and Current Affairs on Channel 4.

³ *One in Five*, a cabaret-style programme filmed with a London gay audience, produced by Kinesis Films.

⁴ A discussion-based film about young lesbians in London, Liverpool and Newcastle, produced by Lusitania Films.

⁵ The Broadcasting Act, 1980.

in the first year – the Channel seemed to commission a much broader range of programming than we all predicted it would. So that threw us off guard. And then we all got jobs in it, which did affect for a time our critical faculties.

BF: But initially we did make those programmes, and they were different to a certain extent. And then the Channel did, not exactly a U-turn ... more a V-turn. ...

JE: A tacking to the wind. ...

BF: That's the curious thing. The first three months of Channel 4 undoubtedly led lots of people working in it to think that the promise had to some extent been justified in certain areas.

MM: Partially because they threw on what was ready and the independents had quite a lot of stuff that was ready – oddly enough, some of the most provocative stuff was slung out in the first couple of months. ...

CG: Like the Gay New Year Party shock-horror³. ...?

MM: And like *Veronica 4 Rose*, another gay programme⁵, and a feminist cabaret and things like that. It was different in content; it wasn't always different in form. I remember having a feeling as a watcher that there were some very radical ideas being circulated, but it looked *even more* boring sometimes than an ordinary evening on one of the other channels.

JE: It did look very boring. And the programmes I was involved with, the same as anybody else's, were very boring because they were all 'talking heads'. That was how the independents got in first – you just pointed the camera at somebody saying something which hadn't been said on TV before, edited it vaguely, and only vaguely in most cases, and out it went. And you did that whole process in about six weeks. It's that kind of element now that's disappeared, in the sense that it's not any more a Channel on which people can talk. The demands for 'entertainment' and so on, and for 'well-made' programmes, mean that it's no longer possible for somebody to talk at length. In the normal run of things, somebody talking for a couple of minutes (which is, after all, how long you need to develop a point) is now an intolerable thing, except in the brackets of 'Comment' or 'Opinion' – it is accounted to be un-entertaining, not enough change in the image, not enough change in the sound. That's what's being demanded from us now.

ANON: Yes, but they got that kind of programming because they were getting things on the cheap, and now they're saying they want something more entertaining, but they're not prepared to put money into stuff that's more radical, that needs more than a studio set-up. ...

BF: I was surprised that more people didn't pay attention at the very beginning to what the Act⁵ said about 'innovative in form', because there are all these bodies of media sociology and semiotics which had lots of things to say about form and formal experimentation.

JE: Not about television. Or rather news and current affairs, yes – almost all the writing has been about news and current affairs, but not about fiction or documentaries.

BF: I thought all these new current affairs programmes on Channel 4

would be very innovative in their visual style and format and was surprised when they weren't. Was that a cost factor, or just a lack of imagination?

RS: I think there's a problem with cost, because if you're realistic about innovation in terms of form and structure, it actually is more expensive. There is an assumption somewhere that it's probably cheaper and easier to do because experimental productions are done on shoe-strings. In fact if you do it properly, it's more expensive because you have to do it several times in several different ways to get it right. The whole rationale of industrial production, following the rules, obeying the 90° rule, and the 180° rule and the IBA rule etc, is that it's an economical process of image-production, because you know where to put the camera, you know precisely how to cut it. If you want to do something about changing the structures, or the spectator position and so on, that needs a lot more work and a lot more shooting-time. This is a point that doesn't seem to be widely understood in Channel 4.

JS: But it's not just the cost factor, is it? It's also presumably the kind of recruitment for current affairs programmes and news programmes. Where are those people recruited from? Precisely from other mainstream current affairs programmes. And unfortunately news and current affairs programmes are dominated by people with a journalistic training who are predominantly text-bound, not particularly interested in looking for images and pictures, and so that gets perpetuated in things like *20-20 Vision*,⁶ *Broadside*⁷ and to some extent *The Friday Alternative*⁸.

BF: I was going to quote *The Friday Alternative* as the exception to the rule. Because there was a conscious effort by David Graham and everyone else on the programme, for instance, to legislate new ways of cutting up interviews and things....

ANON: But once they'd decided this is a new way, they repeated and repeated and repeated it....

BF: Because it then has the economic advantages accruing to it which

⁶ *20-20 Vision* was a prime-time half-hour current affairs series, produced under the auspices of two women, Lynn Gambles and Claudia Milne. In March 1984 it was discontinued and the production team disbanded and the producers accepted a new C4 commission for a current affairs series with a different title and format.

⁷ *Broadside* was a feminist-inspired half-hour current affairs series which alternated with *20-20 Vision*. It was discontinued in August 1983 after a dispute over control of policy between its staff and the board of management.

⁸ *The Friday Alternative* was a weekly news programme, produced by Diverse Productions and headed by David Graham, which the Channel discontinued after charges of 'left-wing bias' and 'un-professionalism'.

00:09:24:21

**Interviews are
nearly always
cut up —————**

**but no - one
notices**

The Friday Alternative analyses the construction of TV news.

⁹ 11.00 pm from
Monday, January
23, 1984.

the old way did—everybody knew what to do, you could do it fast, you knew what the rules were.

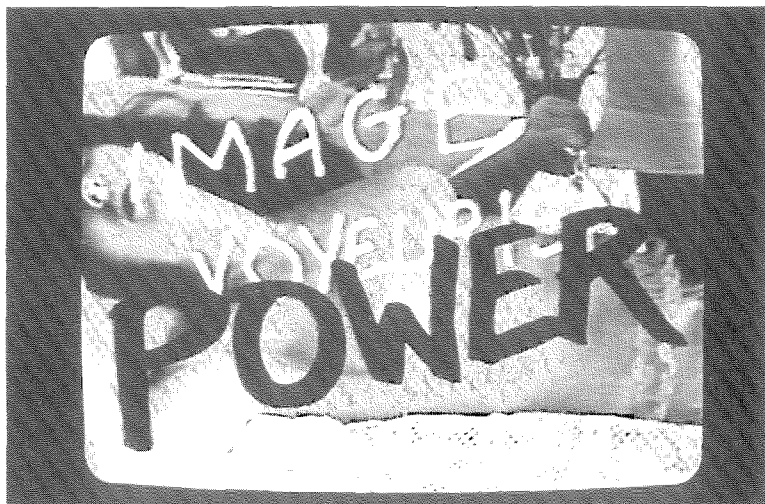
JS: But in some ways, it was still very text-bound, wasn't it? Even though it made very interesting use of graphics, it was still very wordy. It didn't rely an awful lot on pictures.

JE: Crucially, you couldn't sit there and eat your dinner and watch *The Friday Alternative*. You actually had to watch the bloody screen for the whole 30 minutes, which was novel and which was a real effort of concentration. That was demanding something which hadn't been demanded before and in a rather surprising way. I think that was the radical edge in terms of its form of presentation.

BF: I take the point about conventional people coming in at the beginning. That will be even more the case now because Liz Forgan has pronounced that what's needed for the new alternative, radical current affairs series is 'wily old professionals'—you need them because the young, amateurish, unprofessional people are going to make mistakes and produce shoddy programmes. So the argument comes full circle.

ANON: The thing is, they invited in many people who had never produced for television before and had maybe made two or three films up till that time. And they encouraged them initially, but they didn't follow up on it. It's a failure on their part to encourage what they started off—it's been the same for a lot of small producing groups who need to keep on making films, so they really are in a position to confidently manipulate their formal material.

MM: Do you think the spiral is inevitably downward? Because, for feminists who weren't tight in enough with the Channel to have received vast commissions like *20-20 Vision* very early on—there's a degree of formal innovation there. I've looked at a tape of the six *Pictures of Women* programmes that are going to go on in January⁹, and I think some are really rather radical interventions into the assumptions around broadcasting about the use of sound and image. The programme they

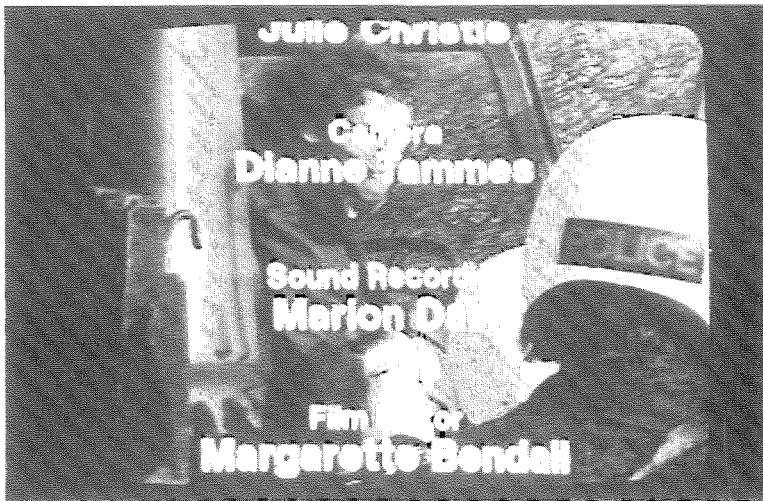


Intervening in the
television image:
Pictures of Women on
pornography.

did on pornography will distress lobbies around that issue on the right, on the left, in the women's movement and in the Mary Whitehouse sector. Where they deal with certain topics, such as the representation of sexuality, I think they will cause more trouble than other feminist programmes have yet posed for the Channel, particularly in terms of just presenting certain kinds of body images.

CG: Yes, but what they're giving (or allowing) on the one hand, they're taking away on the other in terms of current affairs television, the commitment to a distinctively feminist strand of programming in that area – *Broadside* and *20-20 Vision*.

JS: Yes, Channel 4 has reneged on its commitment to that strand. I remember when the Channel first started, there were lots of interviews with Liz Forgan, strategically placed in magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, where she was arguing for the kind of distinctive perspective that women could bring to current affairs and how refreshing that would be... and a year later that's virtually gone.



A distinctive perspective... now defunct: credit sequence from the discontinued women's affairs series, *Broadside*.

Channel 4 and TV Economics

CG: It seems to some of us that the economic effects of Channel 4 are working out differently to the original prognosis. Originally, it was argued, the big ITV companies would have more capital, and would be able to make bigger programmes with more money up front and would drive out the small independent producers through pure economic attrition. It's not quite worked out that way – it would appear that the big ITV companies are finding that they can't actually produce programmes at the same cost as the smaller independent companies and they're having to do lots of cost-cutting. They're appealing to get more money from government to subsidise their productions on the Channel. The way the independents *are* being driven out is much more through the commissioning process, rather than through economic processes.

JS: One of the major economic effects for the larger ITV companies

¹⁰ Head of Current Affairs, London Weekend Television.

¹¹ A regular late-night Monday series of independent UK and foreign films.

¹² £30,000 per hour is the notional average cost of programming across Channel 4. Film documentary and drama can cost anything up to ten times that sum.

making programmes for Channel 4 is that they're now having to cost their programmes in a way that they've never had to do before. They're having to cost exactly what it takes to put together a 45-minute documentary. In a talk at the National Film Theatre, Barry Cox from London Weekend Television (LWT)¹⁰ admitted that he had no idea how much an hour of documentary programming, for example, would cost at LWT, until the arrival of Channel 4 – they were horrified! I think one of the implications of this is that it does give the larger companies an additional piece of ammunition in arguing with the union about manning levels and crewing agreements. They now know how much it costs to put a crew on the road in a way they didn't quite before. Everything is now a direct cost, rather than a below-the-line cost, and has to be budgeted for. They can actually use that argument with the unions about how much labour they take on – and it all runs parallel with anxiety about the decline in advertising revenue. There's increased pressure on budgets . . .

BF: Yes, I worked for Independent Television News (ITN) – there's an interesting case in point. In order to try and get the Channel 4 News franchise, ITN put in a ludicrously low bid by its own standards and at least one of the reasons it's been so bad is that they've been grossly under-funded. They've had one foreign crew which was axed at the end of the year, and the new Editor Stewart Purvis has again been promising to give us good news on an impossible budget. It's a good illustration of the fact that when the ITV companies try to actually adjust their costs downwards to Channel 4's level, they can't actually deliver the goods.

MM: But if we move on to the independent companies, that's true there as well. Even in the limited sense of choosing women's films to go out in the *Eleventh Hour*¹¹ series, there were costs that simply weren't met at all by the Channel's budget. We spent hours doing the sort of thing that, if we were full-time employees of a TV company, we'd be paid to do – like watching the films in the first place – all essentially for free.

RS: There are two aspects to that. Firstly, the smaller outfits manage to keep overheads down in various economical ways and also, as you suggest, because there's less alienation of labour, there's a lot more time and energy given for the wages paid. And that's a difference Channel 4 depends on – that exploitation of independence. Because people are able to do a different kind of work that they are very interested in and committed to, they are prepared to give up certain kinds of material payment.

CG: But, given that the ITV companies can't afford to produce programmes on Channel 4's rates, isn't that also responsible for the tendency to use Channel 4 as an off-loading place for 'repeats'? You had that agreement whereby the ITV companies could pay part of the Channel 4 levy in kind, in programme repeats, films and so on. That process must be accelerated because they've got to look for massive amounts of low-budget programmes to offset the average. Presumably they're able to invest in high prestige, high cost things from time to time, provided they've got a mass of stuff which undercuts the average of £30,000¹² per hour quite heavily.

JE: But when it comes to that point about 'less alienated' labour, that discussion has been very confused. It's been discussed in terms of a very woolly ideal of collectivism on the one hand, and a kind of commitment to the principle of a trade union which operates a closed shop on the other. That's why a whole series of independent outfits have run themselves into trouble. How can collectives, for instance, deal with the fact that not all labour that you employ will want to be full-time? How can you form a collective overnight of people who have very different relations to each other and different relations to the object being produced? How can you maintain or begin to break down forms of the division of labour when you have a very short working life together? All of these questions none of us could face – we didn't even know they were there until they suddenly emerged as issues on the agenda, whilst we were working: there *was* a group of directors who control the production fee, who had the power to hire and fire the rest of us, who controlled the equipment and so on. The left as a whole was taken unawares by what Channel 4 could have been, because they didn't know what kind of working relations would be practical under the circumstances on offer. We didn't know what those circumstances would be until 18 months ago or less.

CG: Even radical companies had to inherit grades of working outside their control – they had to inherit certain jobs. The union and the industry demand you advertise and employ people in certain designated posts, whether you like it or not. Most people are going to get paid a certain salary according to the Independent Television Companies Association (ITCA) rates, and that immediately structures working practices and responsibilities in ways in which it was impossible to combat.

JE: But equally even the most radical people working as journalists and so on and making the transition into Channel 4 had in their heads those kind of grades, that sense of the division of labour – at the same time we had a woolly idea of collectivism which we'd never bothered to think about, employed as we were in institutional jobs where the question would never arise. We never made the transition to a sense of what would be practical under the circumstances.

CG: And there's the ACTT (Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians) in television, unlike even journalism, which imposes an immediate in-built assumption that there's a hierarchy down from £25,000 to £6,000 and people are slotted in. I do think that if you break the disparities of payment, then you've a much sounder basis for actually breaking down the division of jobs. Because if people are being paid only £6,000, why the hell should they take responsibility for all kinds of jobs that it's none of their brief to tackle?

MM: Anyway, you can have parity of payment. On the *Eleventh Hour* series that we worked on, the five people who were responsible for it (not the crews that we hired on higher rates to help make the introductions) effectively did have hourly parity of payment all the way through. You

can accept the ACTT rates, budget them in and re-divide them – nobody is holding a gun to your head and saying you mustn't give back into the pot your sum.

BF: Although there was some woolly thinking, an important element had to be that everyone thought the new working environment was so much better than what they'd been in before, comparatively. If I compare Diverse Productions to ITN I'd have to say that editorial meetings were wonderfully free, that jobs are wonderfully flexible, and so on. And just that quantum leap in working conditions made you forget that you could have been so much more radical about the way you were going to organise working practices. It was so wonderful to be in this dream world, being paid to do what you wanted to do.

CG: But that was the case of people coming from ITV or the BBC into established companies. There have also been people coming from all kinds of other jobs, like myself, for whom the increase in salary was a wonderful feature which took a lot of coming to terms with. You didn't rock the boat.

BF: You're saying there were pressures for conformity from both directions.

CG: I would like to argue that the acceptance of existing working practices in the industry was part of the problem in Channel 4. I do believe that work produced from those kinds of hierarchised structures will always tend to be inferior to work produced from more collectivised, democratic structures . . . That shows even in the case of *The Friday Alternative*.

JW: That begs so many questions. . . .

RS: There are different kinds of work for which those practices will aid the process, certainly. But to generalise without seeing your criteria . . . I don't think that follows.

JW: And I fundamentally disagree. It seems to me on that model, nothing that could be read or used as radical by audiences could ever be produced within the mainstream broadcasting organisations. I just don't believe that's the case.

CG: I think I'm being misunderstood. What I am saying is that a collective structure, involving the engaged participation of all the people as opposed to having an attenuated, hierarchised production process, is in general going to produce more innovative work than more orthodox structures. The division of labour embodies forms and ideologies within itself.

BF: I think we're skating on very thin ice because we haven't actually decided what models of programmes we accept as being experimental or innovative. For instance, *The Friday Alternative* makes a great play of the fact that it's got a different form – but another programme produced in completely conventional ways, with inter-camera reports, 'noddies' and cut-aways, could be enormously radical too. So how do you relate work practices to that?

ANON: Channel 4 just set up their contracts and so forth to deal with established production structures. It was more or less up to us to work

00:03:46:00

**At least we're
different....**

*The Friday
Alternative* declares
its difference with its
unconventional use
of intertitles.

out our own collective ways of working. Channel 4 was not interested in whether we were working collectively. Did total production units like *Diverse* have a better chance of working out a collective system than companies which had to hire in crews for the actual shooting, and then editors? If you want to involve eight or ten people at every point in the editing, for instance, you have to be able to work like *Cinema Action*, over a long period of time. But it is difficult to initiate collectivity in the production process unless it already exists to some extent and you have a bunch of people who already understand the production process and can be flexible within it. If you have people who are new to that, it's difficult for everyone to be educated to the point where they can make cutting decisions which would be useful. So it seems that the type of collectivity that we produce varies from one situation to another and there are variables which don't have to do directly with Channel 4. I don't think Channel 4 provides anything other than the money and the pressure and the expectation that you'll do it along conventional lines.

Scheduling and 'Objectivity' on the Channel

CG: John, could you re-cap some of your arguments about what you imagine scheduling to be and what it could be...?

JE: It's terrific—I know nothing about scheduling at all, I write 750 words for *City Limits* on the subject, and I'm suddenly the world's expert on scheduling. This reveals to the whole world that actually nobody knows about scheduling—the first six months of Channel 4 also display that fact clearly. Paul Bonner¹³, whose responsibility it was, actually had to learn scheduling from scratch and got it very wrong. The Channel had meanwhile opted for a conventional form of scheduling, whereby you have absolutely rigid time-bands and certain key programmes which are plonked in like the *Seven O'Clock News*, *Brookside*¹⁴ at 8.00, *The Eleventh Hour* at 11.00, which kind of justifies its title, and so on—and

¹³ Programmes
Controller,
Channel 4.

¹⁴ A twice-weekly
soap opera set in a
modern housing
estate in
Liverpool. See
Christine
Geraghty,
'Brookside... No
Common Ground',
Screen July-
October 1983, vol
24 nos 4-5, pp
137-141.

then filling the gaps in between with programmes that are made to fit a certain running-time, and making those fill-ins with as much variety as possible. That's the philosophy of scheduling that goes across the other three channels as well. There are other ways of scheduling, of course, such as grouping programmes around a basic theme which is then advertised in the press and so on – a theme like health for example. . . .

RS: That's normally a geographic thing – the only examples on British TV have been BBC2's 'Polish Weekend', 'French Week' etc.

JE: But Channel 4 could have been scheduling around issues such as health, old age and so on, which would have covered not only current affairs (which usually talks about such things) but major drama as well. And, in particular, other sorts of programmes on specific areas like, for instance, the cinema programme or whatever. But that model of scheduling, which is a radically different one, wasn't adopted and a decision was taken around January 1982 for a Channel which was going to open in November 1982.

ANON: But how does the matter of scheduling affect our main concern, which is the content of programmes?

JE: It dictates the length of programmes, it dictates the place programmes get in the evening's viewing, it also dictates the subject matter of programmes to a very large degree. For example, if you're doing thematic programming you would then begin to commission single documentaries around those topics – you would break down the real series pattern in terms of which something is called *20-20 Vision* or *Voices* and so on. You would no longer have those formal notions of a slot – you would begin to get programmes commissioned around particular subjects, from regular suppliers in the kind of format they had evolved for themselves. Such an approach shifts the balance of commissioning away from formally defined series into subject areas.

BF: It would be a production nightmare, something like that.

Outside the Parliamentary consensus: *Broadside* displays its feminist inspiration in its logo.



JE: But we are being plunged into that production nightmare anyway. We are all being told that we can no longer rely on one commission of a series, that we can no longer rely on Channel 4 alone, and so on. I think it would have been better to be put there in the beginning, but in a creative way, by being given in advance a series of major areas of programming that Channel 4 was interested in. It would have created a different atmosphere for us all.

JW: I'm not sure – I recognise the argument, and I think it's an important one. The Channel has made some tentative attempts towards that. In 'Nuclear Week', it tried very hard to take on programmes in those forms, and I don't think it's abandoned that structure entirely. I also think that if you're looking at a fundamental political issue that the country faces, it's not necessarily the best way to have this week as 'National Health Service Week'. It can be quite productive to have your commissioning editors producing programmes over a six-month period, including *The Nation's Health*, the follow-up programmes about that series, a *Right to Reply* about the same issue, all of which form one nexus of ideas and concerns, complemented by the Scope series *A Picture of Health*, complemented perhaps by an element in the *20-20 Vision* strand. But you shouldn't just put up your notion of scheduling as a paradigm, when you *can* actually find a productive debate over meanings and over political issues within the sort of structures that the Channel's working at the moment.

BF: There's another problem, isn't there? Who knows what issues are going to confront the audience over the course of a scheduling year that you might want to address? There's a certain amount you can do – what's happening at the moment with Cruise deployment and all that, I suppose that could have been predicted. But there are issues that couldn't be scheduled in advance.

JE: Yes, I'm not arguing that this should be the exclusive focus of any one week. That would be dead boring and a real turn-off. There'd be other programmes, obviously – but neither am I arguing that it should be labelled 'National Health Service Week'. I mentioned health as a very general category which would then be able to be advertised as such.

JW: I genuinely don't want that – health is one thing that is a continuing issue which I am engaged in and everybody is engaged in simply as a fact of life. I want TV to engage with that over a long span of time and in a hundred different ways, just as I want it to do with feminism or my understanding of Eastern Europe or whatever. And I'm not sure that the model of scheduling you're putting forward actually helps my relationship with that medium and what comes out of that medium.

JS: I agree. For example, how would scheduling according to themes or issues encourage formal innovation? It does reinforce preoccupation with content. It shifts attention away from form, the look, the image, which I think is the whole problem

JE: The idea is not that it should be 'Health' for one week, and for the other 51 nothing about health. But it is a way of encouraging imaginative, once-off productions, around a particular, very general thematic, and

simultaneously foregrounding that in terms of the way the channel presents itself to the public in its trailing, in its publicity and that kind of thing.

CG: That would actually enable people campaigning outside the Channel to fix on that week for using those programmes, for organising around them. The isolated programme doesn't give people much of a chance to seize on it and link it to their practice outside television, whereas a degree of well-publicised concentration might do. But in general terms I think we're getting fixated on John's example. The real criticism is that the Channel does not recognise what some of us recognise, that television is not a discrete set of programmes – it's actually an aggregate of meanings over a particular period of time, some of which work together, some of which cancel each other out. The Channel has never looked at television from that point of view – scheduling policy has never asked how do these meanings add up? Where do they coincide? Do they cancel each other or whatever? They clearly organise their scheduling according to pre-ordained slots which correspond with their notions of audiences, the way 'the family audience' works, to compete complementarily with the other channels and so on. Those things have gone into scheduling. It's simply been a question of putting abstract programmes into particular slots in most cases.

BF: That seems to me symptomatic of the whole of Channel 4's approach to television, not just how it affects scheduling. If you talk to Jeremy Isaacs for instance about what's been said about news and current affairs over the last 20 years, he genuinely does not understand. It's not just scheduling that is symptomatic.

RS: I hope I'm not just saying 'Be realistic, be pragmatic', but how many television executives do you know that talk about 'aggregates of meaning'? You've got to talk in other terms about such things. . . .

JW: They do talk about aggregates of meaning but not in those terms, in different terms, in terms of consumers, in terms of the way they can sell time, all that. What really undercuts your argument is that they're not talking about the meanings *you* want to see on the Channel. They're talking about meanings that fit within their political framework, and that framework formulated by the system in which they live. They are creating those meanings in the scheduling, they are balancing the meanings, compounding the meanings, undercutting the meanings undoubtedly, in quite conscious ways – ways I often find quite abhorrent. But you can't say they're not doing that. You can only say that they're not compounding the meanings in the way your politics wants to see those meanings compounded. And that seems to shift the argument – you can't shift it to become a more 'objective' argument about television, which doesn't recognise the political position from which you're speaking.

The IBA and 'Intellectual Censorship'

BF: That brings us full circle to the IBA as a regulatory body, doesn't it? Because looking at what's happened at Channel 4, it comes down to

problems about regulatory structure. The IBA sees the output of Channel 4 as having to be somewhere within the Parliamentary consensus. Now there's not only a conflict between the independent producers and the IBA over that, there's a conflict with Channel 4 too, because to a certain degree they agree with the IBA on that. Yet Channel 4 commissioned people to do things which were very explicitly outside that Parliamentary consensus. Then, through lack of understanding or whatever, they reneged and ended up saying that programmes cannot be produced from a particular intellectual position.

JW: I really don't believe that. . . .

BF: Well, let me take the two examples that spring to mind. The alternative current affairs tradition is Marxist inspired, the *Broadside* strand is feminist inspired – *20-20 Vision*, well, we don't know. You can argue that what Channel 4 can't accept is a programme that's made from a particular point of view or intellectual tradition, because it breaks all their rules on the parliamentary consensus.

JW: I don't believe that: there was a series of feature-films on *The Eleventh Hour* which was explicitly feminist in its conception, its programming, organisation and in the meanings it produced; the Latin American film season was explicitly Marxist; so were the two films on Marx by Stuart Hall from Thames. Those films have come out of those traditions and it's really important they're recognised as such.

BF: But they're one-offs, aren't they?

JW: But they *are* contributions to the meanings produced by television.

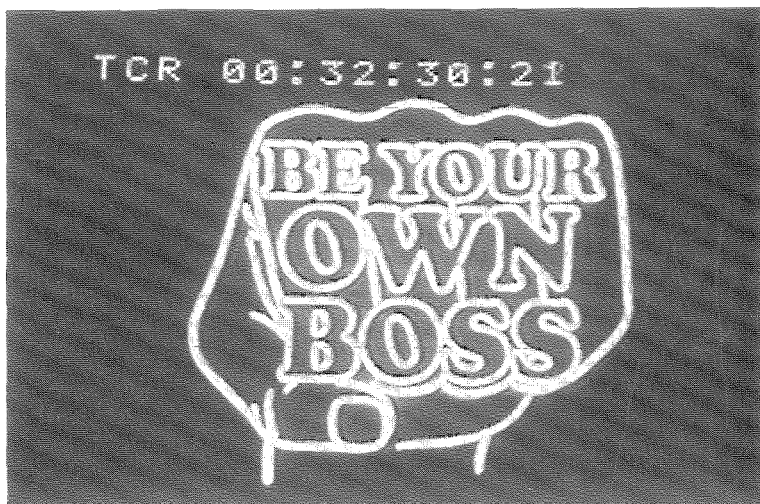
BF: I agree, but for a *series* to come forward and state that it's going to be based on a particular Marxist analysis of society – that's in no way on Channel 4's agenda, they can't accept that.

JE: John's talking about two programmes or half a dozen movies. You're talking about a series in the sense of TV as traditionally understood – something which regularly fills an hour or half-an-hour for most of the weeks of the year.



A conventional subject in a conventional series format? *20-20 Vision*.

Apolitical pugilism?
Title design for
Henry Cooper's
small business series.



RS: The problem is one of shadow-boxing with ideology – programmes like Henry Cooper's private enterprise series, *Be Your Own Boss*¹⁵ or Gus MacDonald's *Union World*¹⁶, never reveal their own assumptions explicitly. That's the whole problem, isn't it? It's only Ken Loach's left critique of the unions¹⁷ that has its politics up front. Opposition is always defined as explicitly political. It's a question of making inroads against the definition of consensus, because whenever 'balance' is cited, it shouldn't be just within Channel 4, but in relation to the rest of British broadcasting. . . . When Jeremy Isaacs stands up at the Edinburgh TV Festival and says, 'We really need something more from the right because we've been too far out to the left too often', the Channel's on the run already. I think that's too defensive – although some of Channel 4's output (mainly in current affairs) shows a leftier perspective than most British television, it's a reasonably small proportion. It's only noticeable because Britain is more socially and culturally retarded than some other European countries: in France and Italy it wouldn't be such a big deal. But then, is Isaacs perhaps being necessarily realistic and trying to defend the Channel's diversity and pluralism in a hostile climate when it is being attacked by a gutter press and relentlessly pressured by elements within the ITV companies and some publicity-seeking MPs?

ANON: We're working in a context where all the dialogue and fulcrum around which everything is 'balanced' keeps moving to the right every week. And Isaacs has essentially a liberal, not a radical, brief – he wants to open things up to alternatives but he's not going to rock the boat, he's under the IBA. Those of us who come from the left are trying to put things into the Channel to counteract the existing right-ward bias. I think we'd have a good argument that the Channel shouldn't introduce any more right-wing stuff than is already present on television. But the only way we can make that argument is from some power-base as producers, and what we're trying to do here is articulate the conditions under which we produce, and the effects that has on what we produce. We

¹⁵ *Be Your Own Boss* is a guide to setting up your own business, fronted by ex-boxer Henry Cooper.

¹⁶ *Union World* is a weekly programme for and about Britain's trade unions, produced for Channel 4 by Granada TV.

¹⁷ *A Question of Leadership*, a three-part series on the relationship between trade unionists and their leaders, in which the IBA demanded changes for 'balance'. Transmission has been indefinitely postponed.

should make more criticisms about what Channel 4 has done to date and what it should be doing from a left perspective. Because if we just say 'OK, he's under pressure, he has to balance' and so on, we're just collaborating with the overall movement to the right that's going on in the country as a whole. ...

Building an 'Audience'

CG: One feature of TV today, and Channel 4 in particular, is that you can never rely on the people you want to see your programmes actually seeing them. TV's so fragmented you can't rely on the notion of a united viewing audience or any common social discourse around TV. So if you want to get people you are addressing to watch, increasingly you have to constitute that audience through material outside the programme, through various forms of publicity, through channels of communication and networks which you've set up outside TV. Those things become doubly or triply important.

JE: I think that's right. However, the real problem is that of listings, pre-programme information – the British system of TV listings through *Radio Times* and *TV Times* actually blocks any attempts to specify your audience, to address your audience and go out and find them... For example, it means that there's not a competitive market of selective or general weekly programme listing magazines. Those magazines like *Time Out*, *City Limits* or the *Sunday Times* colour supplement which tried to do selective listings are now extremely limited in what they can choose for their pages. So we're in a very bad situation – if you try and find your specific audience, you have to do it exclusively through the medium of paid advertisements. And production companies can't raise the budget to pay for advertisements, and the Channel isn't in the business of advertising individual programmes to sectional audiences. It is now advertising its programme-flow for the evening or for the week in question. Advertising policy in the daily newspapers is to advertise every programme on that evening with a couple of stills from the most important one. For tonight there's a still from *Film on 4*¹⁸ and a bit of blurb about all the programmes on in the evening...

JW: But the Channel is now breaking much more into that area – advertising individual programmes – whether it's daily or weekly advertising. There's a shift into that kind of thing, but Carl is right that we have to break open our idea of television into a much wider notion of it as an institution rather than simply a selection of programmes.

CG: Production groups can invite coverage from relevant magazines – the trade union press, black press, women's magazines, *New Socialist* etc – to build up particular audiences.

MM: But often they aren't given a transmission date until it's too late for many of the political papers that might be interested – the monthlies and the bi-monthlies. That's what happened to us with the women's film series on *Eleventh Hour*.

¹⁸ A showcase of new Channel 4 commissioned and co-produced films and dramas.

The political project unpublished: *Two Stage Sisters*, first seen on UK television in the women's film series on *The Eleventh Hour*.



Fighting Back

CG: First steps have been taken, at least on the trade union front. ACTT and NUJ (National Union of Journalists) stewards in the production companies will be getting together in the near future, to work out common strategies on how to fight the wide differentials in wages, the increasing job insecurity, the lack of responsibility of the Channel towards work prospects of trade unionists in the industry. All of these kinds of questions are going to be discussed collectively. That's an important step – and there's also the setting up of the Channel 4 Users' Group. These are the first signs of collective action against the Channel at both ends of the spectrum, one year on. But what kinds of things do we think these embryonic organisations should be doing? What should we thrash out policies on?

BF: A utopian view of the union position would be that at least in news and current affairs we would get to a position of having uniform agreements, a uniform level of scales. At the moment my company is grappling with the problem that the people left over from the previous commission (*The Friday Alternative*) are being employed on the new commission¹⁹ on wages anything down to half of what new people are being started on. And this kind of disparity doesn't just happen within a company, it happens across companies. If you relate it to another company doing the same sort of job, like Brook Productions' *A Week in Politics*²⁰, you get an enormous disparity.

CG: Yes, the ACTT minimums are now so low, that companies can now legitimately (from their point of view) fix wages where they like. Union representatives around the various companies, whatever the formal and legal status of Channel 4, ought to unify around regarding Channel 4 as the *de facto* employer, despite the fact that there's a lump system going on, a sub-contracting system designed to split off groups of employees from each other. The situation is made even more difficult, of course, by the short-term contract system which makes union 'trouble-

¹⁹ *Diverse Reports*, a new alternative news programme from Diverse Productions, in which reports will be commissioned from a range of political views.

²⁰ A regular 45-minute series on Parliamentary and governmental politics, produced by Brook Productions.

makers' even more vulnerable.

ANON: But then in what sense is anybody who's operating under these conditions an independent any more? We're just becoming farmed out versions of the establishment TV structure.

JE: Yes, but crucially what has been farmed out is any responsibility for the people who work on Channel 4 programmes. So there's no possibility of a direct labour dispute between a Channel 4 producer and Channel 4. There's always the Channel 4 producers and the people directing the companies who are all 'in the same boat'. The only possible way is through lateral solidarity, which means that everybody does not deliver programmes from the independent sector, if one company has a dispute with Channel 4, because of their commissioning policy.

JS: Yes, but you're not organising on a union principle, you're organising on the basis of the top few high-flying companies who've been commissioned regularly – Diverse Productions, Brook Productions, the ones who have a cosy little niche in relation to the Channel. But the people who are most vulnerable are the freelance workers who are taken on for ten weeks there, twelve weeks there. They have no regular employer, so it's very difficult for them to articulate demands against anybody. The only hope they've got is working through the ACTT freelance shop, which for all sorts of historical reasons is very weak and even despised by some sections of the union.

CG: That's true, but it's only the regular suppliers of programmes on a week-to-week basis who have any industrial clout against the Channel – that's where it will have to start to benefit all Channel 4 workers.

BF: We obviously need to assimilate everybody. But the thing that we are searching for at the moment is a means of doing that. It's a problem that has to be resolved – one of the essential elements has to be to organise laterally. So far that hasn't happened. One reason is that the people who were instrumental in agitating for Channel 4 and theorising about it all became part of the production mode. Once they were in production their ability to address themselves to those sorts of questions diminished rapidly.

RS: But in the IFA (Independent Filmmakers' Association) sector, through the self-consciously collective alliance, independent producers, individuals and groups have been able to exert a very considerable degree of influence and bargaining power on the terms offered by certain institutions. The IFA's impact on the functioning of the BFI Production Board is the clearest and probably the best example of that, as I mentioned earlier. Now that was an example in a small, particular area of independents forming a common front to have some impact on the institutions. The Channel seems to have functioned from the start in isolating and dividing into a form of competitive supplicantism, so there is no sense, through the union or any other grouping, of independents having any kind of impact. I suppose the IFA did get a slightly better contract with Channel 4, but not much. . . .

JE: What worries me, frankly, is that the Channel 4 Users' Group, which has been repeatedly launched and never really come to anything,

²¹ The 1977 Annan Report on The Future of Broadcasting proposed the fourth channel as an Open Broadcasting Authority to 'publish' programmes from a wide variety of sources.

²² Fortnightly 'magazine'-style programmes – one 'West Indian', one 'Asian' in emphasis. Screened alternately in the same slot and made by the same company, London Weekend Television. See Paul Gilroy, 'C4 – Bridgehead or Bantustan', *Screen* July-October 1983, vol 24 nos 4-5, pp 130-136.

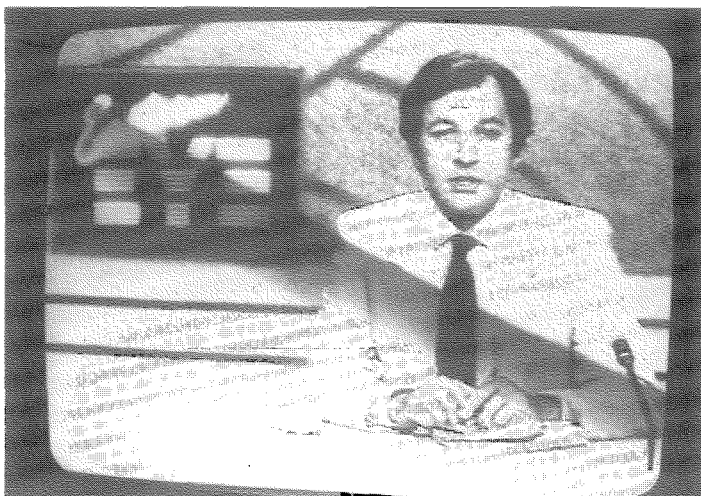
has not been supported by the producers. It seems to be something which could have provided the bridge between those who were temporarily in production for Channel 4 and those who were consuming the stuff. You do meet the odd few people at left meetings, like the Socialist Society, who want to talk about issues like the media, who watch Channel 4 and think there are certain things which should be defended. And their shopping list is quite close to what ours would be – they think that Channel 4 could go further and are looking for some focus of organisation. Just because they are members of the TV audience, which is fragmented and domestic, there seems no way of organising that sentiment. We haven't found an answer – it's a very different question to organising through the union, which is essentially organising to improve your lot as producers. But, fundamentally, in order to defend what the Channel could be, there has to be some way of making a bridge between independent producers and the audience.

Unionisation v. 'Access'

MM: Based on my experience of watching freelance journalists organise over the years, it seems to me that maybe 'independence' isn't worth the price. A totally dependent, totally in-house structure, strikes me as about the only method of sufficiently organising industrially. If I were a TV professional who actually did it for a living all the time (and the fact that I can do it *not for a living* is symptomatic of what I'm describing), I'd demand an end to the model of the publishing house that transmits programmes²¹, and look again at whether one might want to be brought entirely in-house. Of course the people who will be the first to be marginalised will be those like me – who in some way want to enter into the communication process but who are not career people.

ANON: Or people like our group who choose not to become full-time, who are not prepared to become structured as a quasi-establishment production unit. Our sense of reference and responsibility needs a specific community and we don't immediately leap forward to try and get another commission from Channel 4, because that's the only way we can survive. But, on the other hand, there's no other way we can survive as a unit that *does* produce stuff for television. If we allow six months or eight months to go by, we discover we've been classed out of the system. And this is true of numbers of companies that represent political interest groups or other kinds of interest groups.

CG: Black programming is an example of the negative features of the in-house process: what the Channel seems to have done is to provide production structure through London Weekend Television and said 'This is our black programming – *Black on Black* and *Eastern Eye*²² – and it's adequate.' Whether or not it's actually accountable to the black community, or represents the interests of the audience they ostensibly went out to serve, is no longer relevant. And it's pretty awful – all *Newsnight* format obsessed with show-biz and pitched at a black and Asian middle



An 'Asian' programme in a *Newsnight* format: *Eastern Eye*.

class. But there's no power-base from which to change it or get any voice within the Channel.

MM: That's obviously one disadvantage of in-house work—you're accountable to the house, not to any kind of community. Another disadvantage is that for every successful continuity of contract that a shop steward rightly attempts to get signed, somebody else doesn't get to go on to TV by definition, unless the industry expands. It's the result of a privileged closed shop position, obtained at a time when there were vast numbers of people who would have liked to have gone in but couldn't. So, insofar as people like us want more people to enter into the processes of the media, every time we succeed *as trade unionists* in preventing that, we create a tremendous problem. . . . I'm not advocating anything, I'm just saying that the two points of advocacy seem to me equally valuable from a left-wing position, and totally contradictory. The continuity of labour position seems to me a good idea, as someone who wouldn't like to re-negotiate my job every six months or so. But it also seems a good idea to turn over the people who make programmes, so that everybody gets a chance. It's the dominant medium; it isn't fair that only about 50,000 professional workers get to do all the work. But, on the third hand, do you think that independent groups who claim to represent blacks, women, gays or whoever, are very much more accountable to those groups than even the lousy *Black on Black* or *Eastern Eye* units at LWT? Because, as a small production group, I don't know how we could have been accountable to the women's movement, when we offered our ideas for films to Channel 4. We didn't have any way of asking everybody to vote on which films they wanted, and we didn't have any inclination to do so anyway, because we had a very specific idea of what we wanted.

JS: I see the contradiction—I was approached by a Channel 4 series that I was very interested in. They said their budgets were very restricted and that they might not be able to take me on for long. I was still interested. They phoned me later and said 'Look, this is very difficult, but we've

found someone who's so interested in the subject matter, she's prepared to do it for nothing. So, given our financial circumstances, there isn't a job.' Now, as someone who makes my living out of working in television, I find it very difficult not to feel incredibly bitter about that. Because that was my job – and yet this person may have been better qualified, more steeped in the issues, more accountable, etc, etc.

MM: I'm sure there are Channel 4 series where people do free work all the time. . . .

JE: We get a letter a week from people offering to do that kind of thing.

CG: Mandy's right – we do want to get more inputs into television, we do want to get more and more inputs outside a particular professional caste. But at the same time as doing that, we're stuck with the problem that as soon as you're in a trade union, as a trade unionist you want to keep that union as strong and combative as possible. So do you then facilitate a process which reduces the strength of the union? Because the more people join, the bigger the pool of unemployed union members, so potentially the union is weakened. . . .

MM: I would say yes, you *have* to do that – it's more or less what the NUJ have done quite admirably in the face of right-wing attempts to stop it. . . . But the problem's going to be compounded with cable. There's no money in cable, so *everyone* could be working for free. Insofar as we would hold an analysis of TV that says we've all been passive viewers, audiences, spectators for too long, and that we'd like to be in-putters too, the prospect of teeny-weeny groups broadcasting from Finsbury Park on a budget of 50p is a fascinating one, but impossible to organise. What happened in left publishing is an interesting comparison – certain kinds of hot metal composition were abandoned long before anything like that happened in Fleet Street. Offset litho was created as a process in which anybody could learn to paste up lay-outs, could do certain jobs. . . .

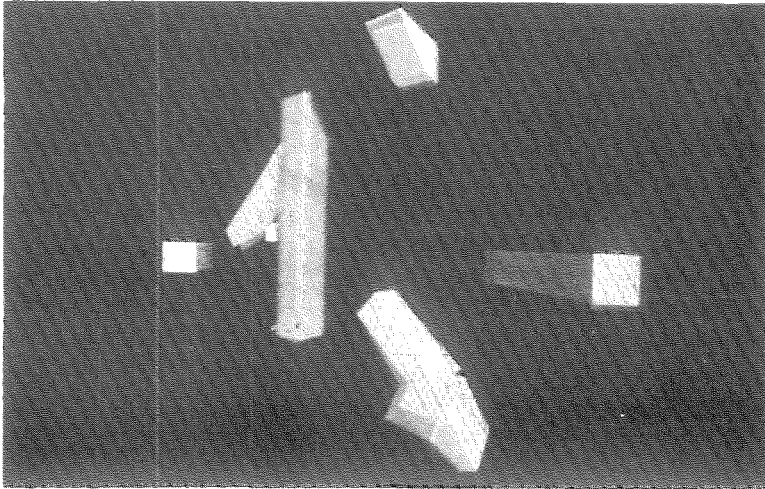
BF: The technology's there in television already for that, isn't it?

CG: But in the struggle for better television, are the broadcasting unions, and particularly the ACTT, agencies for change or simply part of the problem? How much energy does one put in fighting inside those unions, to change them or re-structure them? Or how much does one see the ACTT as an essential part of the way that television was carved up traditionally? Will the forces that can change television be generated outside television, opposed by the ACTT? Is it an ally?

MM: This problem could be easily solved if there was enough revenue so that every group of disenfranchised would-be broadcasters could be enfranchised in a workshop. That was ACTT's effort to recognise those sorts of developments, and an admirable one.²³ Clearly steps have been taken, but it seems to me there is a problem. If you do constitute livings out of a division of labour, how many livings are there? If you sub-divided them a little more fairly, and got your brothers knocked down from £25,000 a head, you could extend it a bit. . . .

CG: All this raises the problem that any critique of the way that television is organised, its financing, its division of labour etc, has to advocate some progressive programme for changing it progressively, for liberat-

²³ In 1982, the ACTT – together with Channel 4, the BFI, the Regional Arts Associations and the Welsh Arts Council – promulgated the 'Grant-Aided Workshop Production Declaration', a new trade union agreement for production groups funded on a non-profit basis. This provided for parity of wages at £8,000 per year, index-linked. See Jonathan Curling and Felicity Oppé, 'A Declaration of Independence', *Screen* Jan-Feb 1983, vol 24 no 1, pp 53-61.



Coming apart?
Station identification
on Channel 4.

ing and re-organising its productive potential. Otherwise, it's going to be seen inside the industry and without, as union-bashing. You can see the ACTT's organisation in the industry as a brake on democracy, on accountability on involvement, on access—all that's true, but if you don't have some positive and convincing proposals for a socially beneficial form of media, you're inevitably going to line up with the right's attack on trade union restrictive practices, on the way that the labour aristocracy has defended its positions inside a very wealthy British industry.

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TRANSFORMING TELEVISION: PART I, THE LIMITS OF LEFT POLICY

BY CARL GARDNER WITH
JULIE SHEPPARD

On the surface TV output has a great variety. Beneath the surface there is far less variety: the construction of a consensus view of the world produces a sense of monotony. Such a monotony is dangerous because it prevents the appearance of a conflict of views. If this conflict is to appear on TV, then both the aesthetics and the production procedures of TV will have to be changed.

—‘British TV Today’ (Independent Filmmakers’ Association document, November, 1980—our emphasis)

IT’S A CURIOUS IRONY, touched on by Enzensberger¹, that left debates about the media seem to lag behind the actually existing technologies. During the early ’70s the dominant debates (and actions) concerned the unrepresentativeness of the press, at a time when broadcast TV was probably a far more significant influence on national ‘consensus’, and much less amenable to social pressure or ‘access’. A major example of this emphasis was the Labour Party’s ‘The Media and the People’ statement, published in 1974², which outlined the need for a National Print Corporation. Then in the mid-to-late ’70s, going into the 1980s, a flurry of analytical work, including that of the Glasgow Media Group, turned attention to ‘mass’ broadcast television in its regulated, ‘public service’ form, which was then incorporated into debates around the Labour Party, the TUC and far left—this at a time when this 30-year old model is imminently threatened by fragmentation, and at best radical overhaul, through the invasion of new sources of the TV image, including video, cable, satellite, video-disc, home computers, etc. Nevertheless, we should be grateful that the last three or four years have seen a substantial debate on precisely the strategic questions of TV today, reflected in the pages of *Screen* over the past year.³ Eight or nine years ago, when the parameters of discussion were whether the Labour movement needed a new *Daily Herald* or something more akin to Lenin’s *Iskra*, it was questionable whether socialists would ever break from their fixation on the written word. So, despite the imminent, far-reaching changes, and assuming that something is defensible and recuperable in the area of

¹ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, ‘Constituents of a Theory of the Media’, *Raids and Reconstructions*, Pluto Press, London, 1976.

² A report of the Labour Party Study Group (1974).

³ See Nicholas Garnham, ‘Public Service v. The Market’, *Screen* Jan-Feb 1983, vol 24 no 1 and replies by Ian Connell in *Screen* Nov-Dec 1983, vol 24 no 6 and Carl Gardner in *Screen* Jan-Feb 1984, vol 25 no 1.

national, network, publicly regulated broadcast TV⁴, what follows will concern itself with the debates, problems and positions concerning that area of broadcasting looked at in retrospect. First, we will examine the limitations and lacunae in many of the programmatic positions being advanced on the left for broadcast TV (and the reasons for those 'silences') and suggest an alternative (or supplementary) approach to the analysis and strategic transformation of TV. In Part 2⁵ we will develop this approach and analysis, which concentrates crucially on the internal production relations of television, through specific examples. In so doing, we hope both to tackle some of the genuine problems of democratising the media and to help build some bridges between important but separate theoretical approaches, which have co-existed uneasily in media analysis over the last ten or twelve years in Britain.

The shift in concern on the broad left from the printed media to broadcast TV was triggered by three developments:

(i) The early and ongoing agitation and organisation of 'marginalised' groups such as the women's movement, the gay movement and black and anti-racist organisations, who saw the issue of media representation as intricately bound up with power and effectivity within the culture – and who recognised the centrality of a critique of broadcast TV's imagery to their practice. It should be added that the permeation of sexist, racist and anti-homosexual discourses in TV drama and comedy in particular presented less of a *prima facie* analytical problem than the more subtle issues of anti-working class or anti-trade union coverage in news and current affairs.

(ii) Nevertheless, those issues were tackled by the significant and influential research done by the Glasgow Media Group from 1976 onwards, published as the *Bad News* volumes.⁶ This material detailed anti-trade union and anti-Labour Party 'bias' in TV news coverage of industrial and political events of the mid-70s. Through quantitative and linguistic empirical analysis the Glasgow studies (inevitably hysterically received by the media institutions themselves) demonstrated that society's principal 'agenda-setting' device was as selective, pro-Establishment and editorially partial as the national press. For a growing number on the left the myth of TV's 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' was cracked for good. The repercussions, particularly in and around the TUC and Labour Party, were enormous and we will examine the programmatic expression of that concern below.

(iii) Throughout the late '70s the increasing availability of new technology, particularly the video cassette-recorder, enabled critical viewers to overcome the transience of TV's images. Suddenly it was possible to examine *carefully* the way particular social issues and organisations were treated by TV news, documentary, current affairs and even situation comedy and drama. Fleeting suspicions of structural mis- or under-representation could be confirmed, documented, theorised and acted against in various ways. For many, the Glasgow research provided a substantial model and example of what to look for and how to go about such work.

⁴ We would steer clear of re-endorsing the notion of 'public service' television, with its overtones of an elite class self-sacrificingly and paternalistically speaking to an undifferentiated 'mass' public.

⁵ *Screen* May-June, 1984, vol 24 no 3.

⁶ *Bad News*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1976, *More Bad News*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1976 and *Really Bad News*, Writers & Readers, London, 1982.

⁷ See in particular Gillian Skirrow: 'More Bad News: A Review of the Reviews', *Screen* Summer 1980, vol 21 no 2; Paul Flather: 'To Make Good News out of the Bad', *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, Oct 30, 1981; Ian Connell's review in *Marxism Today*, Aug 1980 and the reply by the Glasgow Media Group in *Marxism Today*, Oct 1980.

⁸ Curiously, this was accompanied by an unfortunate (tactical?) concession to the liberal belief that professional broadcasters are capable of reforming the media themselves: '... we have not explicitly suggested that corrections to the above are beyond the reasonable, not to say conservative, expectations of professional practice since much of our evidence as to what could have been done is culled from the so-called quality press' (Glasgow Media Group, *More Bad News*, op cit, p 401).

⁹ For an amusing account of the *Man Alive* debate on the Glasgow work see Greg Philo, 'The Corporation Strikes Back' in *City Limits*, August 6, 1982.

This is not the place to examine critically the Glasgow University Media Group's findings – that discussion has been carried on in various places in the last five years.⁷ Nevertheless, it is important to register the debt which the British left owes to the Glasgow Group in stimulating a substantial and badly-needed re-think about the role and future of TV and its socialist transformation. Secondly, we have to draw out its implications for socialist strategy in this area. Unfortunately, in keeping with its early, academically 'respectable', image, the first two volumes included little in the way of direct programmatic advice about how TV might be changed in the light of their findings. But there is a strong implicit argument, which coincided with the sentiments of the trade union and Labour Party component of its readership, that the central problem resides in the social and journalistic formation of newsroom personnel.⁸

In 1982, after several years of acrimonious and generally fruitless debate with media practitioners (the attempt of one group of 'professionals' to address another?),⁹ the Glasgow Media Group threw off its thin veil of professional detachment and respectability with its third volume.¹⁰ This was shorter, condensed, more accessible, programmatic and obviously addressed to activists and those on the receiving-end of media coverage. We will examine the prescriptive aspects of that work in a moment. Meanwhile there had been other developments – in 1979 the Trades Union Congress lurched into action. Its Media Working Group (including Alan Sapper of the Association of Cinematographic, Television and Allied Technicians; the National Union of Journalists' Ken Ashton; the Association of Broadcasting and Allied Staffs' David Hearn and Bill Keys of the Society of Graphical and Allied Trades) unprecedentedly produced two pamphlets, which marked the first significant intervention of that body in the media field. The first¹¹ critically examined media coverage of 'the Winter of Discontent' (January-February 1979) in which striking health and public service workers were continually represented as a threat to 'the public'. It is now established 'common sense' across the political spectrum that the events surrounding those strikes and protests against Labour Government policy in the public sector were a primary cause of its General Election defeat later that summer. What is still an intense area of speculation and debate is how much *media representations* of that series of disputes, and the resulting media-led clamour for trade union 'reform' under the Tories, were crucial in that political shift. Certainly it seems impossible to extricate those 'real' events from their public representation and understanding as elements in the unfolding political process – but one mustn't forget that behind them were the increasingly right-wing policies of the Labour Government against the public service sector (cuts, pay-freezes etc.) which stimulated those strikes and demonstrations in the first place. Looked at in this wider context, it is not difficult to see the TUC's intervention as a retrospective attempt to shift responsibility for the Labour defeat away from the Labour Government itself, towards the fashionable

bogey, the mass media. This 'media determinism' has been a recurring theme in the debates around the failure of the Labour Party in recent years.

The second TUC booklet¹² was directed at trade unionists, to help them 'make the best of the media as it is' and was very much an abbreviated version of a longer book by Denis McShane¹³, which has since become the unofficial labour movement handbook on handling the media. But little of this addressed questions of structural change in broadcasting. Building on the Glasgow work, these first steps provided more detailed critical analysis of current reporting, and various tactical tips on how to deal with the media to best advantage on a day-to-day basis. The general thinking seemed to be that these were interim, defensive steps until the next Labour government brought in decisive, structural reforms, particularly in the press, along the lines of TUC evidence to the Royal Commission on the Press or the Labour Party's proposals for a National Printing Corporation. In the words of Len Murray: 'What trade unionists must do, whilst seeking to improve the basic position, is to make the best of the situation in which we find ourselves.'¹⁴ Significantly, too, both the TUC booklet and the McShane book were addressed to individual 'trade union officers', advising them on how to build good relations with individual newspapers, radio stations or reporters. Forms of collective action against the media, of which there had been several in the 1970s¹⁵, though mentioned in passing, were heavily downplayed. The 'professionalisation' and 'respectabilisation' of the labour movement's dealing with the media were the order of the day. If there was any strategy in this work, it was one requiring greater 'access' for labour movement voices and more sympathetic media personnel. Both the TUC pamphlet and the McShane book clearly implied that the media *as constituted* are adequate instruments for the 'transmission' of labour movement or socialist 'messages', if only approached and primed in the right way.

But 1979 also saw one of the most significant developments in left and trade union interventions in the media debate—the formation of the Campaign for Press Freedom (which significantly became the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom—CPBF—at its 1982 conference, against some opposition from broadcasting members, such as the NUJ Executive officer and television reporter Vincent Hanna). This broad left organisation, sponsored and supported by many trade unions and Labour MPs (and now financed by the Greater London Council) has undoubtedly become a strong focus for left-wing dissent and campaigning about the wide range of British media, especially through its bulletin, the *Free Press*. It has contributed significantly to the debate inside the Labour Party and the eventual position of the 1982 manifesto. With shared membership in many cases, there has been considerable overlap between the positions of the Campaign, the TUC Media Committee and other left social democratic formations, such as the Institute of Workers Control, which organised a large conference¹⁶ on these issues in January 1979. Unfortunately, organisations and groupings to the left

¹⁰*Really Bad News*, Writers & Readers, London, 1982.

¹¹*A Cause for Concern*, TUC publications, London, 1979.

¹²*How to Handle the Media*, TUC publications, London, 1979.

¹³Denis McShane *Using the Media*, Pluto Press, London, 1979.

¹⁴*How to Handle the Media*, op cit, p 3.

¹⁵A non-exhaustive list is contained in Carl Gardner, 'A Step-by-Step Guide to Fighting Racism in the Media' in *It Ain't Half Racist, Mum*, Comedia, London, 1982.

¹⁶See Carl Gardner's report in the TV section of *Time Out*, April 6, 1979.

¹⁷*Free Press*,
'Supplement on
TV', 1981.

¹⁸Published in
Labour Weekly,
June 25, 1982.

¹⁹'Changing
Television', p i. It
is worth remarking
on the absence of
reforms for the
financing of TV,
both in this
programme and in
'Labour's
Programme, 1982',
in comparison with
the centrality of
that issue in
discussion of the
press. The central
contradiction of
Channel 4, for
example, which
claims to want to
address different
and minority
audiences, while
being financed by
advertising which
demands the
aggregation and
homogenisation of
the 'mass audience',
has made this issue
extremely urgent.

²⁰*ibid*, p ii. The
second half of this
quotation is lifted
straight from
'Labour's
Programme, 1982'
and finds an
identical echo in
Really Bad News.

of the Labour Party, in particular those holding a more thoroughgoing Marxist analysis, such as the Communist Party or the Socialist Workers Party, haven't contributed any significant programmatic positions on how the media might be organised in a democratic, socialist society. The left social democratic consensus has held sway unchallenged in recent years.

Initially, however, the CPBF concentrated, as its early name would suggest, very much on the issue of reform of the press. Certainly the perennial plan for a new 'workers' daily' newspaper, to replace the *Daily Herald*, which folded in the early '60s, found its most ardent fans inside the Campaign (this project has since gone further with the publication of Lord McCarthy's favourable viability report to the last TUC conference). To date, however, the CPBF has not set out programmatic positions on broadcasting separate from those of the Labour Party. However, in 1981 it published an important statement, as a supplement to *The Free Press*, which defined one of the most carefully considered inputs into the nexus of left social democratic policy on TV—the 'Changing Television' group's charter for TV reform. This was the result of discussions among a group of radical programme-makers and 'communications specialists' (including at least one member of the Glasgow Media Group), notably Thames Television directors Greg Lanning and Alan Horrox. The 'Changing Television'¹⁷ proposals probably constitute the most detailed programmatic critique of the shortcomings of British TV to date and have been influential in establishing most of the parameters of the debate in and around left social democracy. So we shall concentrate primarily on those positions, which in any case, overlap substantially with those of 'Labour's Programme, 1982'¹⁸—only occasionally, where the two programmes do not coincide, shall we make substantial distinctions between them.

Early in the document the authors present their basic argument:

*Proposals to reform the broadcasting institutions must involve greater democracy to ensure that the differences in society are fairly represented and must be addressed to three basic aspects: the aims, the control, and the access to the media.*¹⁹ (our emphasis)

What we will call the 'aims-control-access' position finds expression in all the major left statements we have mentioned. Seeking to expand the limits of pluralism, and advancing an alternative to the consensual, paternalistic 'inform-educate-entertain' aim of public broadcasting as presently constituted, the 'Changing Television' group continue:

*We propose a new definition of the aims of the broadcasting institutions, which recognises the conflicts of interest and groups within society and would lay a duty on broadcasters 'To represent fairly and accurately the differences within society, and to produce programmes from the different perspectives in society'.*²⁰

Specifying methods by which this might be achieved, the writers add:

*There should be extensive facilities for people and groups to put their views direct to the viewing public... strands of programming would develop which are clearly authored and produced from as wide a range of perspectives as are found in society.*²¹

²¹ibid.

²²ibid.

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Tied closely to this is an expanded notion of 'access'. Recognising one major problem as 'the narrow social and educational base from which professional broadcasters, particularly in the higher echelons, are drawn', the group argue that 'it is essential to establish much greater access to the broadcasting industry in general, as well as greater access to programme production.' Such access would have two main features – direct editorial control of an expanded range of programming, on mainstream budgets, by minority groups, and a shift in recruitment and training patterns, with positive discrimination to make staff more representative of society at large.

This in turn leads to reform of the *control* of broadcasting institutions:

*... the existing controlling boards of the IBA and BBC should be required to be broadly representative of the ethnic, sex and class composition of society... [run by] a system of public representation via local, regional elections to local broadcasting boards [to judge whether companies carry out the revised aims, to hear complaints and to supervise editorial appointments]... These regional and local boards would provide delegates to a national conference which would act as the supreme authority in broadcasting policy.*²²

These reforms are described as a 'minimum package' of legislative measures: 'A longer term aim should include the revision of those structures in order to break down the centralised control of the BBC and IBA and replace it with a more democratic and accountable structure.' Interestingly, the major point at which these proposals differ from those of 'Labour's Programme, 1982' is on the question of ownership. The Labour Party manifesto avoids this issue, while the 'Changing Television' proposals have 'a declared aim to remove the media from private ownership' without spelling out how this might be achieved – or how the temporary continuation of such ownership of ITV and (now) Channel 4 companies could be reconciled with the prescribed degrees of democracy. While both programmes are undoubtedly wedded to an expanded version of 'public service broadcasting', any similar proposals drafted today, two years on, would have to grapple with the problem of reversing the massive degree of privatisation of TV, via a wide range of technologies, which will certainly have taken place before any Labour government is back in power.

Many features of the 'Changing Television' document are innovative and will remain influential in the resistance around broadcasting in the foreseeable future, but there are two distinctly problematic areas which bear strongly on the line of analysis this article will take. First, the programme of reform, based on an 'aims-control-access' approach, is essentially an *administrative* programme, one which sees democratic

²³See for example James Saynor's interview with Tony Benn, a major proponent of 'aims-control-access' reform of the media ('Benn and the Broadcasters' in *Still's*, Sept-Oct 1983).

²⁴For further discussion of this point see 'Channel 4, One Year On: Producers Talk Back' in this issue of *Screen*.

control, different personnel and a wider social range of inputs into TV as the key to transformation. It's a view which sees the medium itself—its technologies, techniques, working practices, programme genres, 'skills' etc—as *transparent* and through which it is only necessary to pass new, more varied messages. There are continual references in all this work²³ to the idea of different groups 'speaking directly' to the audience through television (as in an earlier quotation from 'Changing Television')—unsupervised, unedited, unprocessed. Even where 'Changing Television' talks of a longer-term 'revision of these structures' of the IBA and BBC, they are clearly referring to the administrative and institutional framework, not the internal production relations. Nowhere in this work is any attempt made to challenge either the current relations of production or consumption of television, which, we would argue, are principal arbiters of meaning within the TV process. We will discuss the intricacies of the relations of production in the second half of this article, but even at the level of one of the most common critiques of the TV process—the fragmented, isolated and passive way that the medium is used—these proposals offer nothing, either in terms of shifting the relations between viewer and medium or creating contexts in which television might be viewed more productively or collectively.'

In this traditional and conservative view of the media, the ideological effects of television are the function of the ideas and social background of its practitioners and controllers, which are 'reflected' in programme content. The mechanisms of representation, the TV apparatus, its conventions, styles etc, are taken for granted as useful and applicable, even for different political purposes—they only have to be 'taken over' by more representative personnel and controlled more democratically.

The second problematic feature of the 'Changing Television' proposals, which is related to the first, is an almost total absence of discussion about the place and role of the broadcasting trade unions, either in the present constitution of television or in the process of transformation—despite (or because of?) the fact that many of the 'Changing Television' group are members of the most powerful union in the commercial TV sector, the ACTT (as are the present writers). One example of the unresolved problems involved is the group's proposal for 'Industrial Democracy'. Might there not be a profound contradiction between 'worker participation with elections to departmental head level, with union representatives on the boards of each organisation' and broader notions of social accountability and control? Can one assume a simple correspondence of interest between highly-paid workers in the industry—a veritable 'labour aristocracy'—and the wider viewing public, or constituent groups pushing for greater representation within TV?²⁴ Any strategy or programme for the radical transformation of TV has to thrash out such problems, and invocations of common interest on the grounds of 'trade unionism' or 'class unity' are hopeless for the task.

That such potentially fraught problems have not been taken up within the debates around the CPBF or the Labour Party is perhaps not surprising—the ACTT is a deeply contradictory body. It has a publicly progres-

sive face, especially on issues of media reform, and many of its policies and campaigns are exemplary among trade unions. Yet, in terms of its industrial role within the commercial broadcasting institutions, the ACTT tends to function as a block to change, particularly the opening up of TV to broader forces and influences. This, we believe, reflects a much deeper problem – the vexed relationship between strong economic trade unionism (often maintained by the pre-entry ‘closed shop’) and the struggle for socialism, which has to involve and bear on the interests of much wider social groups lying outside the (male) ‘working class’ proper.

To illustrate the practical ramifications of the ‘aims-control-access’ critique, one has to go no further than the debates around Channel 4 in the two or three years before opening and in the twelve months since transmission. Here there has been an overwhelming emphasis on personnel – particularly the personae and identity of the Controller and the Board, which dominated many early debates. Yet, despite the inclusion of several relatively progressive commissioning editors and an influx of a large number of radical programme-makers in the first year, by December ‘84 the Channel seemed to be turning into ITV2 – and certainly producing less and less ‘innovation’ with every month. The reasons for this cannot be explained by reference to humanistic notions of direct ‘agency’, at whatever level of ‘control’ or ‘access’. Channel 4 was inscribed into a semi-orthodox advertising-funded structure, perched on the edge of the commercial set-up; new production companies (significantly they had to be *companies*) were established and run on traditional business lines, even in those groups that previously had a more collective practice; production agreements, working relations and hierarchies were modelled on those obtaining in the old ITV companies; and the Channel gave no finance or priority to challenging the traditional relations of consumption or programme-use, which was epitomised by the adoption of the anodyne *TV Times* as its major promotional and information organ. With the exception of the work of the Independent Filmmakers’ Association, very little effort was put into analysing and criticising these arrangements or their likely effects – either inside the Channel 4 campaign, which was composed in the main of the Channel’s future entrepreneurs, or on the broader left, who accepted its promises at face value. With the exception of some discussion of the legal constraints of the existing IBA Act, which proved binding, there was little recognition of the long-term impossibility of passing radical messages through such a tangled set of institutional barriers and conservatising social relations. Neither could any of these obstacles be ‘blamed’ on any one group of human agents.

More specifically, recent discussions of the fate of specific left interventions into Channel 4 – e.g. *The Friday Alternative*, *Broadside*, *Crucible* and *A Question of Leadership* – have been framed almost entirely in terms of direct ‘censorship’ (i.e. a critique of structures of *control* and limitations on *access*). But, while censorship has undoubtedly taken place, we would argue that much more subtle processes have had equally

²⁵Julie Sheppard was a researcher on *Crucible* from February 1981 to May 1983.

²⁶David Berry, 'Science in Society', *New Statesman*, October 28, 1983.

insidious effects in rendering left interventions ineffective or making them easy targets for cancellation. The apparent 'auto-destruction' of the women-produced current affairs programme *Broadside* through bitter internal disputes and the termination of the science series *Crucible* by Channel 4 and Central TV before the end of its first series of thirteen programmes, are worth looking at in greater detail. In the case of *Broadside*, the root of the problem seems to have been the collision of a radicalised, strongly feminist group of employees, seeking greater control over the financial decisions affecting their short- and medium-term futures with the series, and a conventional, hierarchised company management encouraged and made necessary by Channel 4's commissioning, legal and financial requirements. The fact that many of the board of management were also 'politically sympathetic' did not change the underlying structural problem. We are better acquainted with the ill-fated *Crucible* series²⁵, recently described as 'a symbol of what happened at Channel 4' by an article reiterating accusations of politically unsympathetic control and censorship.²⁶ But the series' problems predated Channel 4's rightward shift in the summer of 1983. From its beginnings *Crucible* was an ill-considered attempt to graft a radical science series and supposedly collective working practices onto an orthodox documentary department at Central Television, with an individualised, hierarchised and conventional labour process, high wage differentials, directors' authorial responsibility, etc. This led to internal dissent and dissatisfaction and a lack of cohesion, focus and shared assumptions about the series' aims, climaxing with the drafting in of 'professional' directors at a late stage on short-term contracts. In brief, the 'watering down' of the politics of *Crucible* had more to do with the conventional and conventionalising processes of TV production, than with censorial interference as implied in the *New Statesman*.

Failure to recognise and challenge the constraining (and for several in the *Crucible* unit) oppressive and exploitative relations of production went hand in hand with the same notion of 'transparency' of the medium that informs the strategies examined above. Thus, there was an overwhelming emphasis on 'content', the creation of a *Radical Science Journal* of the air, complete with alternative 'experts' talking to camera, an expository and didactic mode of address, and little consideration of the relation between sound and image, or ways that one might shift and change the audience's ways of using what was being offered. Formal strategies to break up the dominant ethos of science on TV were at a minimum—several of the programmes were not formally different from the *Horizon* series on BBC2 which they claimed to be challenging, and, within those terms, not half so assured or competent. Any progressive meanings that the resulting eclectic, verbose and often autocratic programmes might have had were then further dissipated by the arbitrary monthly scheduling, decided by fiat by Channel 4. That's one further aspect of the attenuated division of labour within TV across the process of production, distribution and consumption, which this essay would like to address. Part 2 of this article will examine in more detail some of the ways this works in practice.

Of course, such observations have not been totally absent from left critiques of TV. It's only fair to mention the minority of writers whose approach has gone beyond the 'aims-control-access' position. We opened the essay by quoting the Independent Filmmakers' Association: in a series of important statements and proposals in 1979-80²⁷ around the setting up of Channel 4, the IFA interrogated consensual notions of TV and fought for a notion of genuine cultural 'independence' and 'innovation' in programme-making. Although never analysed in detail, the recognition that the existing production machinery and relations of production were inadequate 'for innovation and experiment in the form and content of programmes' was always a strong theme in their public statements:

*Programmes are presented as though they are content transferred through or from the broadcasters to the audience by way of a neutral medium, the TV programme. But TV is not neutral, as most people working within it know. It is full of routines, of correct ways of doing things, of permissible directions for innovation....*²⁸

Again, talking specifically about the future of Channel 4 and the need to make 'special organisational arrangements' to support 'innovation and experiment in both production and scheduling patterns':

*Without special measures, innovative work for the Fourth Channel will be stillborn. As it will not fit conventional production patterns, its financial needs will be neglected.... Standard attitudes emanating from standard structures will not give non-standard results.*²⁹

The 'special organisational arrangements' which the IFA proposed was The Foundation—a chain of regionally-based production-centres, financed by up to 10% of Channel 4's budget, which would be able to experiment with form, content and methods of production, as well as establish new, more democratic relationships with audiences, outside the existing TV production set-ups. Eventually the proposal was watered down (particularly the budgetary provisions) and became the Workshop Declaration³⁰ supported by the ACTT, which set up a number of regional production-centres on ACTT minimum wages to produce innovative broadcast and non-broadcast material. This is not the place to assess the output or results of this development, but it points up the contradictory nature of the IFA/ACTT policy. If one were to criticise the IFA, it would be for agitating within film and TV culture almost exclusively and not in the broader public arena, around the Labour Party and CPBF, where its views are sorely needed. Instead, the IFA's overall critique of TV's production methods have resulted only in an under-funded institutional embodiment of an alternative model. While some material gain has been made for independent production, the critique of the wider TV world has been dissipated and something with the distinct features of a 'ghetto' culture created. Similarly, while the foresight and support of the ACTT has been rightly seen as a progressive and hopeful sign, the erection of a 'special status' for the

²⁷'British TV Today' (Nov 1980) and 'Channel 4 and Innovation—the Foundation' (Feb 1980). Reprinted in *Screen* vol 21 no 4, 1980/81, pp 58-66 and 67-79 respectively.

²⁸'British TV Today', p 2.

²⁹'Channel 4 and Innovation', p 3.

³⁰Available from the ACTT, 2 Soho Sq., London W1. See also Jonathan Curling and Felicity Oppé, 'A Declaration of Independence', *Screen* Jan-Feb 1983, vol 24 no 1, pp 53-61.

³¹ *Visible Fictions*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1982.

³² *On Television*, Pluto Press, London, 1980.

³³ Stuart Hood, op cit, p 34.

³⁴ *ibid*, p 39.

³⁵ For a damning elaboration of this theme, see Stuart Hall, 'Whistling in the Void', *New Socialist*, May-June 1983.

Workshops has in turn worked to quarantine the rest of the industry and union from that example and influence. Such is the dialectic of partial gains.

Other recent work has begun to recognise the centrality of the internal constitution of TV's labour process to the elaboration of its aesthetic, programme styles and content. John Ellis³¹ gives some important indications of the relationship between the growing 'industrialisation' of TV production, the burgeoning of the repeatable series format and the elaboration of specific 'house styles'. Exactly how far the process of 'industrialisation' can go in TV is something we will want to discuss. Another important contribution in this direction is offered by Stuart Hood,³² himself a former Controller of BBC2. Hood gives one of the most readable and informed accounts of the pernicious intricacies of the TV labour process and its grading-system, which emphasises its nature as a form of 'control' of the work-force. But the utility of his observations is hindered by a peculiar political fatalism:

*This argument [for a highly developed division of labour and associated grading-systems] cannot be faulted in a capitalist system in which the aim of the employer must constantly be to increase profitability at the expense of the workers; in a socialist society, where the attitudes to work and to the division of labour were different, it would have to be re-examined.*³³

Again, at the end of this passage, Hood asks 'whether it is possible to change the great broadcasting institutions from within or whether they can only be changed by a change in society'.³⁴ Embedded in these casual remarks are the politics of socialism first, structural transformations of the institutions afterwards—the old minimum/maximum programme. On the one hand, there are economic, bread-and-butter demands under capitalism (for which unions like the ACTT might be adequate instruments) and, on the other, a stirring, Utopian programme for the socialist hereafter. Symptomatically, Hood, while critical of all aspects of the TV institutions, is silent about the shortcomings of the workers' organisations in the industry, particularly in relation to the long-term political project.

³⁶ 'Labour Power and Aesthetic Labour in Film and Television in Britain', in Mattelart and Seigelaub (eds), *Communication and Class Struggle*, Vol 2, Paris, International Mass Media Research Centre, 1983.

³⁷ Chanan, op cit, p 318.

To us, the opposition of 'change from within' and socialist transformation from without seems mistaken. The elaboration of a programme of deep transformation of the production relations and labour process of TV, and the struggles around issues raised by those reforms, is an essential part of the transformation of the media and society. That struggle from 'within' and 'without' the industry (not simply or principally at the level of legislation) is crucial in developing a real understanding of the roots of ideology and 'misrepresentation' in TV, in evolving alternative models in practice, in helping break media hegemony and persuasively demonstrating to wider layers of society that the media could be organised and run in a radically more democratic and responsive way than at present. If a notion of 'liberation' of the media any longer has a meaning, that's where it resides. Such work is part and parcel of redressing what has been called 'the loss of vision' of socialism in Britain.³⁵ As long as transformation is conceived as simply a beefed-up

version of Channel 4, with nicer people in charge and making programmes, then the vision is distinctly uninspiring. Similar strategic arguments obtain in the case of other public institutions under attack from the free market privatisers – the Arts Council, the National Health Service, and so on. As in the case of ‘public service’ broadcasting, the struggle for their defence has to be accompanied and informed by a critical, radical programme to transform social relations which embody within them a particular ideology of ‘arts funding’ or ‘health care’.

Another writer who has examined the nexus of problems we would like to discuss is Michael Chanan.³⁶ He develops several themes we will deal with in Part 2, which could be subsumed under his ‘uncontentious’ (but rarely acted upon) recognition: ‘The study of the political economy of any form of cultural production must... be concerned with an examination of the material nature of the *forces* and relations of production on the one hand, and the factors affecting the mode of consumption on the other’³⁷ (our emphasis). Unfortunately, despite many useful insights into the nature of the broadcasting unions and the divisions within TV staff, Chanan centres his analysis upon a notion of ‘aesthetic labour’ as a sort of nineteenth century artisanal production inherently incompatible with mechanisation. He also mars an interesting observation about the notion of film ‘conventions’ by a gross over-estimation of the semioticians’ neglect of issues of production: ‘They [semioticians] have not truly understood the fundamental grounding of the conventions of Hollywood cinema in the need to establish formal controls over the labour process.’³⁸ The determinacy of the organisation of production, which we will examine in relation to the TV studio, has not been totally neglected by the semiological tradition; though it would be true to say that it has not been a dominant concern of the bulk of such work, which has been emphatically concerned with the ‘internal’ operations of the text *vis-à-vis* the construction of the individual ‘spectator’. Despite acknowledgements of the importance of institutional determinations, including the organisation of the production process³⁹, it has rarely been integrated with the main (textual) line of the analysis. And most of this work has been concerned with Hollywood cinema – television has remained sadly neglected. The significant exceptions, such as the work of Skirrow and Heath⁴⁰ demonstrate our argument by example – their 50 pages of detailed analysis of one instance of ‘television in action’, the ‘specificity of television production’ as a ‘signifying practice’, manages to leave the actual material production process Granada’s *World in Action* completely out of the account.

This points up what we would see as the problematic dichotomy within media theory in Britain – the way that it has split along well-defined, almost exclusive lines.⁴¹ On one hand, broadly speaking, a relatively orthodox school of Marxist analysis has looked at the political economy of TV, examining the macro-institutions, their funding, their economic and political relations and their relationship to the wider socio-economic context. This is work associated with such figures as Murdock, Golding and Elliott at Leicester and Nicholas Garnham at the Polytechnic of Central London.⁴² Such positions, while emphatically

³⁸ibid p 325.

³⁹For example, Dai Vaughan, ‘The Space Between Shots’, *Screen* Spring 1974, vol 15 no 1, pp 81-82; David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, Addison-Wesley, USA, 1979, pp 8-9; and, most exceptionally, John Ellis, ‘Made in Ealing’, *Screen* Spring 1975, vol 16 no 1, pp 78-127. None of this is to suggest that institutional questions were not frequently raised in both *Screen* and *Bad News*, but they were never integrated successfully into questions of meaning.

⁴⁰Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow, ‘Television: A World in Action’, *Screen* Summer 1977, vol 18 no 2, pp 7-61.

⁴¹Annette Kuhn has usefully pointed up this split between ‘text’ and ‘context’ in the analytical treatment of television and film, and the differential construction of ‘audience’ and ‘spectator’, in ‘Women’s Genres’, *Screen* Jan-Feb 1984, vol 25 no 1, pp 19-30.

⁴²See for example Nicholas Garnham, *op cit*.

⁴³For example, see the conclusions of Graham Murdock's 'Radical Drama, Radical Theatre' in *Media, Culture and Society*, vol 2 no 2, 1980.

⁴⁴Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984.

⁴⁵Derived from Harry Braverman's classic text, *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, London, Monthly Review Press, 1974.

recognising TV as a means of production with similarities to others, have operated with a somewhat simplistic, realist aesthetic⁴³ and a more or less transparent view of the medium. They have emphasised the moment of production and its institutional space, played down the relations of consumption and the role of the (active) audience, and have seen the major means of change residing in significant legislative and structural transformations of the 'aims-control-access' type (while giving perhaps more emphasis to the question of finance than the 'Changing Television' proposals). This approach is one shared overwhelmingly by the social democratic left – here the economic is determining in almost every instance, leading to a financial fatalism and a complete disregard for text-based strategies – attempts to encourage 'subversive' reading, oppositional uses, etc.

On the other hand, stemming from a post-Althusserian re-thinking of Marxism, structuralism, linguistics and psychoanalysis, a current of thought most readily associated with *Screen* (at least until recently) has concentrated primarily on the media (particularly cinema) as systems of meaning or representation. This cluster of theoretical approaches has furnished many valuable insights into the complex processes previously subsumed under the simple notion of 'communication' – in particular, it has revealed how 'naturalised' filmic or televisual structures or devices, such as point-of-view and mode of address, actually *position* the subject in relation to the cognitive content of programmes or films, from which they can make (particular) sense of it. Paradoxically, the specific institutional and economic frameworks in which this production and consumption is carried out have been largely ignored. Text-based analyses have predictably yielded text-based solutions – formal strategies to disturb the audience's relation to the image, to shift the subject's position, and to challenge the authority of dominant meanings.

Historically, these two approaches to media analysis have often been employed exclusively – if not in sharp antagonism or sheer incomprehension. In a real sense they both saw different 'moments' within the complex processes of the media as determinate, to the exclusion of other emphases. We think such an opposition has to be overcome, that theoretical and strategic approaches have to be developed that keep 'moments' involved in TV or cinema and their mutual interactions – political economy, signifying practices and the relations of production/consumption – continually in view. This is not to say that we can or need to develop a new meta-theory: perhaps, as Lyotard has suggested, such *grands recits*⁴⁴, new totalising narratives, are no longer possible or credible. But analysis of any mass medium has to recognise its complex *dual* nature – both an economic and industrialised system, a means of production, increasingly turning out standardised commodities, and at the same time a system of representation, producing meanings with a certain autonomy, which are necessarily multivalent and unpredictable. In the second part of this article, we will apply this double recognition to an examination of the television labour process⁴⁵, particularly in studio production, as both a form of economic organisation and a significant influence on the TV text.

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PUBLISHING

THE CULT OF THE GENERALIST: BRITISH TELEVISION CRITICISM 1936-83

BY MIKE POOLE

IN THE SUMMER of 1983 the *Observer* newspaper shifted its television review and preview coverage from the arts-orientated 'Review' section to the sports-dominated 'Leisure' section. It seemed symptomatic—an apparently cosmetic design change that in fact concealed a number of deep-seated assumptions and prejudices about television: that it somehow isn't quite part of 'cultural' life proper, that it can most accurately be described as a leisure activity and that this puts it roughly on a par with sport. Now whether or not this can be said to reflect the actual cultural status accorded to television in contemporary Britain—and a number of factors, not least the likely role of cable in enlarging the leisure-entertainment complex, suggest that it is not wholly inaccurate—it clearly has important implications for the practice of television criticism, the parameters of which are largely determined by the perceived cultural profile of television itself at any given time. The press, of course, has traditionally always been hostile to television, seeing it as a direct competitor—most recently in the case of Breakfast TV. But this in itself cannot account for its relative *critical* neglect of the medium. Nor, quite obviously, for the marked absence of developed critical strategies elsewhere, notably in the academy. The character and temper of television criticism in Britain is, on the contrary, closely bound up with the pecu-

liarities of the larger cultural formation as a whole, particularly the discursive hegemony that continues to be exercised by a literary tradition wholly disproportionate to its narrowing social base and contracting actual constituency. Much of what follows will be an attempt to show how what might have been a dialectical relationship turned into a double bind: how, that is to say, television's own radical uncertainty about its cultural status was rapidly transmitted to its early critics, who in turn failed to take it seriously enough to provide the kind of supportive criticism necessary for the development of a genuinely and self-confidently *televisual* culture. (A pattern, incidentally, very much repeating itself now in a slightly different form with Channel 4.)

First, however, a word about the scope and terminology of this article, which is intended as a contribution to a forthcoming television criticism event organised as part of the British Film Institute's 'Year of Television'. It will concentrate mainly on newspaper and magazine criticism of television, partly because that – to a considerable extent – is all there is, but also because this kind of writing ultimately constitutes a part of the institution of television in a way that more academic work, such as there is, does not. We also need to be clear about the distinction that is sometimes drawn between criticism and reviewing, if only to reject it. Criticism implies rigour and scholarship, reviewing immediacy and impressionism. In this article the two will quite deliberately be used interchangeably since reviewing does not *per se* preclude criticism, of which it is simply one particular, more populist mode.

More important is the distinction between the review and the preview. Unlike theatre or film criticism, television criticism has traditionally been a discourse of retrospection, reviewing material after it has been broadcast in a past tense shared, as it were, with a readership which can be assumed to have seen the programmes in question. Film criticism, by contrast, tends to inhabit the present tense and is addressed to a *prospective* audience which it is assumed has yet to see the work in question. The retrospective mode was in large measure responsible for the evolution of what has become television criticism's most characteristic *form*: the witty *jeu d'esprit* detached in all essentials from its object of analysis by its inscribed sense of television as a closed event, something already too widely circulated to be worth going into in any great detail – the mainstream television critic's greatest fear is the charge of dealing merely in the *réchauffé*.

However, a more prospective mode did begin to make its way into the grammar of television criticism in the 1970s when detailed programme previews, previously outlawed by both the BBC and the ITV companies, first started to appear in publications like the *Sunday Times* and *Time Out*. The videocassette revolution and the arrival of a fourth channel further encouraged this development, and with cable and satellite to come, it seems that the television criticism of the future will be more likely in form to resemble a film review than a match report. It is because television criticism is such an historically variable discourse that I would like to begin by briefly sketching its history.

I. History: 'Critics Work for Newspapers'

The critical response to television followed a similar pattern to that which had greeted the advent of radio in the 1920s: an initial preoccupation with the technical aspects of the new medium and a growing fascination with its social impact being only tardily succeeded by a recognition of it *qua* medium. Thus, we find the London *Evening Standard* still running banner headlines like 'The Wonders of Television' three years after the first broadcast transmission in November 1936. In much the same way, the *Listener* had throughout the 1920s tended to discuss radio as a techno-social phenomenon, not evolving regular critical coverage until the mid-1930s. This 'lag' reflected a central uncertainty about the cultural status of the new media. In the case of television, attempts to resolve the question of identity – typically by the importation of a critical discourse derived from an altogether separate cultural system, namely 'Literature' – merely compounded the problem, producing a doubly weakened criticism. Slow to recognise the cultural claims of television in its own right and approaching it instead with a literary set of values, it was a criticism that could only proceed by suppressing its earlier techno-social concerns. The result was a discourse that came to concentrate almost exclusively on individual programmes, regarded, as Colin McArthur has observed, as isolated 'art objects' in the classic literary-critical manner, 'separate and autonomous, prised free from history and society'¹. This, in turn, produced 'an overwhelming privileging of product rather than process and institution'². It is no accident that the most serious, at-length consideration of the BBC's pre-war television output should have appeared in a *film* magazine. *World Film News* was running a full page of television criticism (by the appropriately named Thomas Baird), at a time when the rest of the British press was limiting coverage of the medium to single-figure column inches dropped in here and there, seemingly at random. True, L Marsland Gander was specialising in television for the *Telegraph* from as early as 1935, but, despite his fondness for styling himself as 'the world's first television critic', he has always been quick to acknowledge that 'the chief emphasis in my job had to be coverage of news *about* television'³. The case of the *Times* is more instructive⁴, and I would like to look at it in detail not least because its unique status within British society makes it symptomatic of general attitudes to television within the culture as a whole.

In common with other newspapers, the *Times* evolved an approach appropriate to the medium's initial 'relay' phase: brief, unsigned notices drawing attention to the then novelty of being able to see some public event or West End spectacle relayed live on a screen. The emphasis was firmly on television as *event*. This was reflected in the way pieces about television often found their way into what we would today call the 'leisure' section of the paper. A 1936 notice, for instance, about the televising of scenes from a West End play by Reginald Berkeley called *The Tiger*, appeared alongside items about the new Riley 1½-litre Falcon saloon, 'a highly efficient car built to combine power and speed with eco-

¹ Colin McArthur, 'Point of Review: Television Criticism in the Press' *Screen Education* 35, Summer 1980, p 60.

² *ibid.*

³ L Marsland Gander, 'Critical Look at the TV Critics', *Television: Journal of the Royal Television Society*, Jan/Feb 1982, p 19.

⁴ See Charles Barr, 'Criticism and TV Drama', *Edinburgh International Television Festival 1977 – Official Programme*, p 32.

⁵ 'Televising a Play', the *Times*, November 24, 1936.

⁶ The *Times*, October 23, 1951.

⁷ *World Film News*, August 1938, p 188.

mony and comfort', the advantages and disadvantages of cheap 'six-penny' seats in theatre galleries and a curious advertising feature for Selfridges titled 'The Wonderful Dignity of A Great Business'. What is extraordinary is that despite television's newness and the evident enthusiasm of the reviewer – 'There was . . . something definitely alarming in the thought that what was comfortably witnessed in the Marconi theatre in Tottenham Court Road was at that same and precise moment being performed in a studio at the Alexandra Palace'⁵ – the article itself merits only three-and-a-half column inches, while the others, including the half-digested promo of the test-drive piece, ran to well over twice that length. Given both its place in the overall geography of the paper and the derisory space allocated to it, one can only conclude that the pre-war *Times* regarded television as, *pace* Reith, hardly even on a cultural level with motoring.

Much the same pattern reasserted itself when television transmissions resumed after the war. There were more news items about the expansion of television, now rapidly under way, but critical coverage remained scant. In 1951, the *Sherlock Holmes* cycle got a chilly reception, the solemnity of which matched its position: next to and dwarfed by a much longer obituary to some worthy philologist. The notice, headlined 'Return of Sherlock Holmes – Appearance on Television Screen'⁶, was remarkable for its lack of curiosity. The passage from book to screen is totally suppressed and the televisual aspect reduced to a discussion of the literary merits of Conan Doyle's character, supplemented by a theatrical-ly oriented appraisal of individual acting performances. Alongside this sort of thing, Baird's efforts in the pre-war *World Film News* seem positively sophisticated. As, for instance, when he approached a version of *Julius Caesar* by asking 'What had Television to offer that the stage had not?'⁷ (The answer was 'dubbed soliloquies', enabling a dramatic distinction between 'oratorical' and 'subjective' soliloquies just not possible in the theatre). By the mid-1950s, television coverage had crept onto the *Times* arts page and the notices were on average twice as long as they had been at the beginning of the decade. The real watershed, however, came with the advent of Independent Television in 1955. With two separate services now available, coverage was stepped up and it became not uncommon for the *Times* to run two notices side by side.

With more scope and presumably more assured of their own status, the still anonymous writers began to move the stiff notice format in the direction of the more individualistic style of the review proper. What was basically a passage from the third person impersonal to the first person singular reached its logical conclusion in the mid-1960s when by-lines began to appear for the first time. But the 'authorship' of Henry Raynor and Julian Critchley was much more limited than that which had emerged elsewhere following the introduction of the commercial network: Peter Black at the *Daily Mail*, his sometime protégé Philip Purser at the *Sunday Telegraph* and TC Worsley at the *Financial Times*. Black and Purser between them are generally reckoned to have been responsible for getting 'serious' television criticism started in Britain. It

is significant from a sociological point of view that both should have written for 'middle-brow' papers like the *Mail* and the *Sunday Telegraph*: publications with precisely the kind of upwardly mobile and culturally deferential readerships likely to want to have their leisure habits bolstered by the designation 'serious'. The *Times*, on the other hand, clearly felt constrained by its readership, conducting an arms-length policy towards television that reflected the cultural establishment's sceptical attitude towards the medium. A view, interestingly, also shared by the *Guardian*, though obviously from more of a Hoggartian perspective on the meretriciousness of the new mass media. The paper's in-house manual 'Advice to Staff', first issued in 1961, talks of a 'general framework of priorities' in the cultural sphere and goes on to list 'Books, the Arts, architecture, archaeology, and history'⁸ – television is not mentioned. Not surprisingly, it wasn't until the 1970s that the *Guardian* produced a substantial critic of the medium in Peter Fiddick.

The introduction of a second, 'minority' BBC channel in 1964 helped to consolidate the place of television criticism in the pages of the national press. It also led to a further enlargement of the amount of space increasingly being given over to the listing of the daily television schedules – both the *Mail* and the *Times* trebled their coverage in this area between 1959 and 1966.⁹ Ironically, what was seen at the time as cynical commercialism on the part of newspapers with holdings in ITV companies and hence a financial interest in advertising their schedules,¹⁰ can in the long-term be seen to have prepared the ground for the series of developments that in the 1970s were to bring about major changes in the whole practice of writing about television. With more and more space being devoted to the printing of detailed schedules – research shows that these pages are among the most heavily used by readers, in the jargon of the trade they have a 'high page traffic' – the temptation for those compiling them was to offer some sort of 'preview' function as well. Copyright laws governing the BBC-ITV monopoly on programme information, via their respective magazines, *Radio Times* and *TV Times*, expressly prevented this. Moreover, any additional editorial copy could only ever have the status of uninformed comment without some sort of pre-viewing of the programmes themselves – precisely what neither the available technology nor the institutions could provide. However, by the mid-1970s cheaper videotape/videocassette technology and effective lobbying by the *Sunday Times* critic Elkan Allan had started to bring about a change. The BBC, in particular, began showing a limited number of programmes to critics before their transmission. This amounted to a mini-revolution. Instead of writing about programmes hurriedly off-air, critics could now be more reflective, and, in theory at least, the distinction between the review and the preview was dead.

In the event, Allan had considerable difficulty in persuading the BBC and ITV companies to allow the publication of preview material, and initially only the *Sunday Times* entered the field with a highly tentative set of annotated listings. While other Fleet Street critics took full advantage of the new previewing dispensation to view programmes at more

⁸ Alastair Hetherington, *Guardian Years*, Chatto and Windus, London 1981, p. 30.

⁹ Jeremy Tunstall, *The Media in Britain*, Constable, London 1983, p. 100.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 100.

conveniently scheduled times in advance of transmission, they continued to keep to the 'reviewing' convention of publication after broadcast (thus retaining the shoddy fiction of being 'average viewers' that seems to be so important to television critics as a group). It was left to the London listings magazine *Time Out* and the *Observer*, in the wake of its competitor, to exploit the opening made possible by Allan and the *Sunday Times*. By the late 1970s these three publications had between them helped to establish previewing as an integral part of British television criticism. Misgivings within the industry about the possible deleterious effects of too much previewing were allayed sufficiently enough for the Philips Award for Television Journalism in 1980 to go to *Time Out*, a magazine that had never published a single review of a television programme. The development of this new critical ecology was the signal for an explosive burgeoning in the dailies of what became known as 'critical guides', old-style schedules listings supplemented by preview material and expanded into full-page features. Both the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* deemed that the critical input into their new programme guides was such that they warranted by-lines; while tabloids like the *Mirror* and the *Sun* used the more substantial listings now possible as the basis for extending their coverage of television generally. Double-page spreads became common and, because of the inevitable imperative to use this extra space in an aggressively 'newsworthy' way, a penchant developed for pseudo-controversy, for the kind of self-advertisingly hard hitting critic epitomised by the *Sun*'s Margaret Forwood, the highest paid television critic in Fleet Street. In general, though, the tabloids were still as likely as they had ever been to want to turn television into 'news' proper at every opportunity. In 1983 alone, for instance, *Coronation Street* provided the tabloids with a whole string of front-page stories: Ken and Deirdre, Peter Adamson's trial, Elsie Tanner's departure. Characteristically, what coverage the popular dailies gave to Channel 4 was largely on the news pages, most notably the *Sun*'s seemingly orchestrated 'Channel Swore' campaign.

The arrival of Channel 4 also inadvertently threatened the relatively peaceful coexistence between television and the press that had succeeded initial antagonisms and allowed the development of the kind of extended newspaper coverage outlined above. *Time Out*, now in financial trouble following a lengthy industrial dispute (and in direct competition with *City Limits*, the magazine formed by its sacked former staff), used the first week of Channel 4 to launch a new listings service: the entire weekly schedules of all BBC, ITV and Channel 4 programmes. Seeing this as a direct threat to their circulations, both *Radio Times* and *TV Times* took legal action on the grounds of breached copyright. The subsequent High Court ruling against *Time Out* had important repercussions for other magazines since it limited the number of programmes that could be listed in weekly publications to an agreed quota. This new quota system was at least in part responsible for the demise of the short-lived 'Critical View' section of the *Sunday Times* colour magazine, which immediately slimmed down its television previewing and diversified into other cul-

tural areas to become 'Week in View'. Indeed, the timing of its original appearance, together with the fact that the *Sunday Times* magazine employs former editors of both the *Radio Times* and *TV Times* in Geoffrey Cannon and Peter Jackson, make it difficult not to see 'Critical View' as something of a dummy-run for a super-programme magazine financed from other areas of the Murdoch empire had the High Court judgement gone against the *Radio Times* and *TV Times*. With the copyright situation now being examined by the Office of Fair Trading, this is of course still a possibility and it is noticeable how Andrew Neill's brief editorship of the paper has already been characterised by the introduction of yet another new section to deal specifically with télévision, this time tacked onto the back half of the review pages. Although Neill's 'Screen' is at the moment devoted to discussion of broadcast television, it is, as its non-specific title makes clear, increasingly likely to be oriented towards the new cable and satellite technologies in which News International has such a large stake. It is, in other words, like 'Critical View' before it, a classic example of how television criticism always takes place in a context determined by imperatives that have as much to do with its own medium or situation – in this case print journalism in the 1980s – as with its presumed object of analysis – the medium of television itself. Not surprisingly, writing about television tends as a result to be very much a discourse in search of an object. Radically uncertain about what or whom it is addressing, television criticism significantly assumes its highest profile and, apparently, its greatest popularity precisely when enacting its own indirection in the pure display of a Clive James or the wilful eccentricity of a Nancy Banks-Smith.

Before moving on to consider the nature of that discourse – and the characteristics of some of its practitioners – two further historical developments, or rather *failures*, require mention. The first involves the spectacular growth of film and television studies in the secondary and tertiary education sector since the mid-1960s¹¹ and hence the development, partly nurtured by this journal itself, of a body of media theory capable of challenging dominant discourses about television and its operation. (Between 1968 – when the first higher education course in Film was instituted – and 1977, 49 such courses were set up.) In particular, the de-centring of notions of authorship, and work on the positioning of the subject and ideology in general, provided the basis for a formidable theory of representation that ought to have been able to redefine the terrain of television criticism as traditionally practised. That this didn't happen tells us a good deal about the wider parent culture. But it also tells us something about the film culture itself: that it lacked a fully materialist analysis and was therefore unable to develop an institutional critique, thus leaving the most immediate day-to-day questions facing journalistic critics untheorised; that like all new disciplines, film studies was engaged in a struggle to establish its own academic credibility and correspondingly prone to the kind of arcane discourse that would 'professionalise' it within the academy, thus limiting its impact and intelligibility almost everywhere else; and that, in the end, it was too *film-*

¹¹ Philip Simpson, 'Institutions and Course Structures', in Christine Gledhill (ed), *Film and Media Studies in Higher Education*, London, the British Film Institute 1981, p 48.

centred. Historically still in thrall to notions of cinema as 'art' and, until very recently, unengaged with popular culture outside Hollywood, it was simply not equipped to deal with the specificity of British television. With the exception of certain academic and left journals and publishing houses and the atypical left-dominated London listings magazine sector, its impact has been negligible.

The second failure concerns television itself and its notorious reluctance to be even mildly self-reflective. This, together with the medium's irresponsibility about its own history and its general neglect of other media, has inhibited the evolution of an on-air criticism of its own performance. There have, however, been sporadic attempts. *Talkback* (1967), fronted by sports commentator David Coleman, was just what its title suggested – a studio audience criticising various aspects of BBC programming through a chair. London Weekend Television's *Look Here* (1978) was more genuinely critical in the wider sense, engaging with a range of issues from the structure of television, through censorship and violence, to the treatment of news, the Fourth Channel debate and the male dominance of the industry. Although consistently interesting, something of the calibre of its understanding of these issues can be indicated by its choice of presenter: the *Economist*'s Andrew Neill, now a very right-wing editor of the *Sunday Times*. Westward's *The Television Programme* (1980) offered a more popular approach. Written and presented by the *Guardian*'s Peter Fiddick, it had grown out of a Schools series, *Looking at Television* (1978) he had made for Yorkshire Television and tended to sugar the pill by coming in obliquely at subjects: one programme about television 'taboos', for instance, jokingly informed its audience that royalty must not be seen within three minutes of a commercial, but it also managed to raise issues about coverage of Northern Ireland. Significantly, neither *Look Here* nor *The Television Programme* were fully networked and their inaccessible scheduling – late at night and weekday lunchtime, respectively – marginalised them to a point comparable with Schools programmes like Thames's 'Mass Communications and Media' series, *Viewpoint*. In general, television prefers its 'critical' programmes to be third-party affairs in which audiences, invited guests or 'experts' are asked to voice opinions in a sort of letters column of the air. Hence the format of both the primetime success, *Did You See...?* and the only other current critical programme, C4's *Right to Reply*. *Did You See...?*'s introduction of the to-camera featurette on a broadcasting topic has been a welcome development, but it's revealing that even here television distances itself from the point of view being expressed by clearly signalling that it comes from an 'outsider'. Indeed, such sleight-of-hand, effectively deflecting attention away while seeming to invite it, can be detected in most of television's attempts to reflect on itself. The rule-of-thumb seems to be: if a programme can't be marginalised by inaccessible networking or scheduling, then ghettoise it so clearly as the work of an 'outsider' that it can be relativised merely as point of view, and if all else fails, popularise it by opening it up to a studio audience and the self-cancelling nebulousness of 'public opinion'.

II. Institution: Promotional Ventriloquy

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Meaghan Morris, who works as both an academic and a newspaper film critic in Australia, has described film reviewing as 'a signifying practice in which pre-existing formal constraints are primary and determining',¹² 'an activity carried out at a site of intersection of *several* cultural practices and institutions: the media, the "arts", the film industry, advertising, propaganda, the academy, promotion and marketing'. In a sense, this is merely to say that criticism conforms to the basic rules of discursivity; that its specific forms are produced by a process of overdetermination at the 'site of intersection' of the different discourses that help to constitute it, with, for example, impressionism emerging as the dominant contemporary mode because of the overdetermining presence of a locally powerful literary tradition. But Morris also offers a much more specific – and more immediately useful – definition of criticism-as-discourse: 'A review is a signifying element in the discourse of the medium in which it appears. It is not a parasite on the film industry nor an extension of a personality, but a bit of a newspaper, a journal, a radio program, a television show.' This, somewhat surprisingly, is a view shared by Chris Dunkley, television critic of the *Financial Times*:

¹² Meaghan Morris, 'The Practice of Reviewing', *Framework* 22/23 (1983), p 57.

¹³ Chris Dunkley, *Television: Journal of the Royal Television Society*, op cit, p 18. Dunkley used a similar argument in an exchange in the pages of *Television and the Stage Today*, July 7 and 14, 1983.

¹⁴ Unsigned article, *Television Weekly*, January 19, 1983.

...[a] big misunderstanding concerns the function of television critics. Startlingly few television producers seem to realise that critics do not work for television companies, but for newspapers; that television critics earn their livings by contributing to the success (in other words the selling of space to advertisers and copies to readers) of newspapers. A television critic's duty is to his readers and his editor. Though he [sic] may spend an inordinate amount of time at Television Centre watching a flickering Steenbeck... he does not owe any more of an obligation to television than the parliamentary sketch writer does to parliament or the crime writer to criminals. Broadcasters are not doing anybody but themselves any favours when they lay on previews.¹³

Whether or not, to borrow the terminology of *Television Weekly*, one chooses to describe the relationship between television criticism and the industry itself as 'symbiotic' rather than 'parasitic',¹⁴ it is clear that the imperatives under which newspaper and magazine publishing operate exercise powerful constraints on the *kind* of writing about television that emerges at any one time or place. I have tried to illustrate this process diachronically in the section that precedes this in relation to historical change, and synchronically in the section that follows in relation to the various typologies dictated by the different publishing sectors ('tabloid', 'quality', 'listings' etc). But if these pressures are to be said to constitute the *institutional* problematic of journalistic writing about television, then, *pace* Dunkley, they also have to be seen in relation to another set of equally powerful constraints – those of the institution of television itself.

The two intermesh every time a critic attends a screening or writes up a preview based on a press release. Nor is there any question, as Dunkley seems to imply, of the traffic being all one way. Newspapers and maga-

¹⁵ *ibid*, p 75.

¹⁶ Chris Dunkley,
Listener,
November 10,
1983.

zines need television every bit as much as it needs them. As we have already seen and Tunstall has observed, one way of 'competing' with television, particularly for the tabloids, was paradoxically to become 'supplements to television, with television schedules and related features increasingly the core of the newspaper'.¹⁵ Recent developments suggest that the 'quality' Sundays are now also beginning to exploit the, as it were, pre-paid promotional opportunities offered by television. Thus the *Sunday Times* magazine's striking close-up of Martin Sheen as Kennedy in the Central TV mini-series superimposed on an image of Kennedy himself. Between them, the *Sunday Times* and *Observer* magazines ran seven television related covers in 1983. In fact, TV tie-ins are becoming increasingly important throughout the print media. Revealingly, this kind of copy is almost invariably produced by writers who do not specialise in television, the aim being to 'generalise' the appeal, and in some cases actually disguise the provenance, of the material in question.

This overarching inter-dependence between superficially competing media is the background against which the transaction between the two institutions that is known as television criticism is conducted daily by individual writers. It is important to stress that, in addition to the constraints imposed on them by the publications for which they write, critics also have to submit to television's own agenda-setting priorities, determined by needs that are often exceedingly remote from individual programmes. Critics never enter viewing theatres to watch discrete objects, but institutionalised products whose 'meaning' is far from simply inscribed in them as texts. Whether they—or, for that matter, most academic structuralists—recognise this is an entirely different matter. Dunkley has drawn attention to the way the kind of programmes selected for preview screenings reflects a bias within television as to what is important or significant about its output.¹⁶ Single plays, drama series, prestige documentaries and anything that has been co-produced tend to take precedence over more 'popular' forms of programming such as light entertainment, sit-com, soap opera and the more journalistic documentary reporting like that associated with, say, *World in Action* or *Panorama*. This imbalance is inevitably picked up, reproduced and amplified in the press inasmuch as critics can only write at length about what they have seen at length. The result is a dearth of coverage of popular, indigenous programming which continually loses out to prestige, imported and co-produced material. And because self-reflective television critics in Britain are about as rare as 'unnatural' eye-line matches in the medium they write about, this bias looks like a question of choice, of taste, of aesthetics, even, and eventually a whole orthodoxy builds around it.

In general, the amount of resources put into promoting a programme — into, that is to say, shaping the perception of its importance — is in direct proportion to the amount of capital that has originally gone into producing it. In the era of rising costs and co-production, which dates roughly from the early-1970s, it became increasingly crucial for both the BBC and the ITV companies to be able to *control* the profile a programme

assumed in the domestic market in order to then go on to re-coup its production costs globally. (Hence, for instance, the lavish campaign launched by Granada in 1981 to promote *Brideshead Revisited*—then, and still, the most expensive television series ever made.) I use the word ‘profile’ rather than ‘reception’ quite deliberately since, to paraphrase the famous Conrad dictum about ‘column inches’, the argument is not so much about ‘quality’ as about ‘visibility’, about ‘audience reach’ and only secondarily about ‘critical’ evaluation. It is not entirely accidental that vast tracts of what passes for television criticism in Britain actually reads like promo.

Control and column inches come together in a very different way in another key area: the interface between programme-makers and the press. Employees of television companies normally sign contracts agreeing not to divulge whole areas of internal decision-making to journalists. Thus when disagreements, say over censorship arise, the programme-makers most directly involved often feel constrained about what they can and cannot reveal to the press. This carefully engendered conflict of interest means that only a minute proportion of the column inches devoted to television in the print media concerns areas of controversy. The relationship between journalists and programme-makers is further policed by the more subtle control exercised through the widespread use of the short-term contract. At Channel 4, contractual arrangements based on a book-publishing model and placing individual programme-making groups into a ‘competitive’, entrepreneurial relation with each other, have accentuated this difficulty—one important reason why so little has been written about C4’s internal politics.

The institutions can also pre-empt journalistic scrutiny and public debate in other, more direct ways. Sue Summers of the London *Standard*, for instance, notes this recent development:

There seems to be a new trend at press conferences, which I find mildly disturbing, to avoid possible embarrassment by dispensing with questions altogether when at all possible. This phenomenon first revealed itself at Channel 4’s summer launch where, instead of the usual question-and-answer session, reporters were herded straight off to the bar after the ritual screening of bits from new programmes. In view of the treatment Jeremy Isaacs and his staff have received from Fleet Street, this was perhaps not totally surprising. More mystifying, though, was the ITV programme controllers’ decision to dispense entirely with a press conference for their autumn schedule in favour of a star-laden garden party in Regent’s Park, at which press releases were distributed along with the drinks.¹⁷

Two final institutional factors are worth noting. The first concerns the way the BBC’s weekly previewing arrangements—the whole of Friday given over to viewings of anything up to eight or ten different programmes—unconsciously reproduces Raymond William’s ‘flow’ effect in a greatly magnified form, with critics being asked to respond to a virtually continuous day-long barrage of images and genres. In the immediate term, the effect is dulling; in the longer term, it helps to sustain the

¹⁷ Sue Summers, *Listener*, September 22, 1983.

¹⁸ After Elkan Allan, who lobbied for its creation. See W Stephen Gilbert, 'Reviewing the Critics', *Broadcast*, July 5, 1982.

fiction of the television critic as some kind of contemporary *uomo universale*, the multi-competent generalist who is fazed by nothing. The price of both is creeping homogenisation: columns that in managing to have something to say about anything, sound the same about everything and hence often seem almost to have been sleepwalked onto the page, the print equivalents of 'moving wallpaper', television's inevitably background 'noise', signifying very little.

'Elkan's Day'¹⁸, as preview day at the BBC used to be known, also illustrates the kind of headlong continuous present in which the television world exists and which it is very difficult for critics to break out of. Television as both a medium and a mode of production is obsessed with contemporaneity, with the new; its grammar lacks a past tense. Until very recently, it has lacked even the most rudimentary archival sense, denying itself its own history and the public the opportunity to enjoy its canon. The tape-wiping scandals that expunged major work like the early dramas of David Mercer will not be repeated, but there is still a major reluctance to open up the archives in the form of repeats or retrospectives. And because television itself is so cavalier about its past, its critics tend to be the same. Very few Fleet Street writers on television could place a new programme historically in its genre, let alone the *oeuvre* of its writer or director. Nor is this simply a question of buffery: if critics do not know where particular programmes come from historically, they will be unable to register how they differ and hence how broadcasting is changing—a major reason why disturbing current trends towards greater television censorship have mostly gone unremarked by critics who clearly have no sense of how previous gains and progressive precedents are being eroded. Significantly, the only group lobbying for more archive responsibility from the broadcasters, Wider TV Access (WTVA), was formed by non-Fleet Street journalists and writers.

In conclusion, then, one would have to say that journalists and critics writing about television operate under the double institutional hegemony of the electronic and print media and that this determines what they can and, often more significantly, what they cannot say about television. The product of this is a discourse in search of an object that is and always was chimerical: television as something other than the institution that constitutes it in all its forms, a screen in the corner of a room, a medium, a star system, a set of signs. A television criticism, in short, so shaped by the institution of which it attempts to speak that it is effectively 'spoken' by it: the ultimate media ventriloquy.

III. Typology: The Gut of Clive and Others

When *Glued to the Box*, Clive James's third and final volume of collected television criticism, appeared earlier this year, it bore a dedication carefully designed to intrigue: 'to Pat and Dan Kavanagh'. Pat Kavanagh is a well-known London literary agent. Dan Kavanagh is not a real person at all but the *nom de plume* used by novelist Julian Barnes for his spoof

thrillers. Barnes of course was James's successor as the *Observer's* television critic. He also happens to be married to Pat Kavanagh, who herself just happens to be James's literary agent. The point about this elaborate little joke is its exclusiveness: most people know that James vacated his spot for Barnes; not everyone knows their way around incestuous literary London. This kind of in-joke, with its immature playing-to-peers feel, was much in evidence throughout James's ten-year stint at the *Observer*. The fact that it also has a literary flavour gives it a much broader typicality.

It was no accident that James should have been succeeded by a novelist. Television criticism in Britain has always displayed a strongly in-built 'literary' bias. At the most basic level, both newspapers and magazines have tended to recruit writers on television from the literary sector. Barnes was replaced at the *New Statesman* by another young novelist, William Boyd, who has since in turn given way to another writer from the same generation, the poet Hugo Williams. Barnes's vacation replacement at the *Observer* is invariably Martin Amis; while the considerably younger novelist, Adam Mars-Jones, understudies at the *Sunday Times* for Russell Davis, himself a figure associated with Cambridge English. One of the *Times's* television writers is Peter Ackroyd, a novelist and cultural critic in his own right; the *Daily Telegraph's* critic is Sean Day-Lewis, the son of a former Poet Laureate; novelist Mervyn Jones was once the *Listener's* television writer. The list goes on and on, especially if we include a sub-group of writers from a literary-theatrical background such as TC Worsley, a theatre critic before becoming the *Financial Times's* television writer in the 1960s, playwright Dennis Potter, who has worked as a television critic for both the *Statesman* and the *Sunday Times*, and another former stage critic, Herbert Kretzmer, now writing on television for the *Daily Mail*.

Yet, ironically, although this large belletristic input clearly reinforces an already marked dependence on an inappropriately literary model—notably nineteenth-century notions of authorship, pre-McLuhanite assumptions about 'representation' and a general willingness to address individual programmes as if they were discrete art objects—there is a sense in which television criticism had initially also to overcome a certain *resistance* in the parent literary culture in order to bring itself properly to birth. Television first became widely available and widely commented upon during the 1950s, a period which coincided with the years when English literary culture was dominated by Leavisite thinking and hence largely hostile to the developing mass cultures, television included. For all its Reithian residue, television could never hope to meet Leavis's demand for a culture of life-enhancing 'seriousness'. Quite the reverse, in fact, for it was during this period that the image of television as an essentially soporific medium first began to take shape—a notion fuelled from the left in the form of Frankfurt School pessimism about 'massification' and its English liberal echo in the writings of Richard Hoggart. Given a literary imbalance in the general formation of the English intelligentsia, virtually no intellectual asked to write about

television could afford to ignore Leavisite strictures on the medium. On the other hand, in the drab, cold-war climate of the 1950s television clearly represented a rare moment of cultural vibrancy. A very English 'solution' seems to have presented itself: if television lacks 'seriousness' but cannot by its sheer presence be ignored, then make a virtue out of this lack precisely by adopting a stance which deprecates 'seriousness' *tout court*. An instrument of sorts was to hand in the English essay-writing tradition of Lamb, Hazlitt and De Quincey, with its characteristically self-deprecating tone. Add to this the genuine levity of influential American 'personality' journalists of the pre-war period like Alexander Woollcott and the Algonquin set, and H L Mencken, who had earlier still pioneered whimsical, gossipy reviewing, and you have a recipe for the kind of *tone* that was soon to emerge as dominant: playful, top-heavy with foregrounded personality, aggressively non-specialist. Clive James is at once the inheritor of this tone and its most accomplished exponent.

From the first, James deprecated himself as a specialist – while correspondingly inflating himself as a personality – loudly announcing himself as *l'homme moyen sensuel* of television criticism. Not for him the Friday afternoon screening or the press launch. 'One of the chief Functions (sic) of a television critic is to stay at home and watch the programmes on an ordinary domestic receiver just as his readers do.'¹⁹ This pseudo-populism comes as part of a package in James and can be observed throughout his criticism in a cluster of attitudes that include an almost Blimpish philistinism in the face of experiment (as in his notoriously intemperate attack on Alan Bennett/Lindsay Anderson's *The Old Crowd*); a profound distrust of theory ('All politico-sociological and sociological surveys of British television can be safely dismissed as moonshine'); an unpleasant antagonism towards colleagues who refuse to accept that 'the first duty of the critic is to submit'²⁰ but attempt to write about the medium in an informed and serious way; and a thorough disparagement of the whole business of being a television critic at all ('a cushy number... the greatest risk to the television critic is bed-sores...'²¹). Not surprisingly, James seems to have learnt practically nothing about television during his decade at the *Observer*. In the Introduction to his first volume of collected criticism in 1977, he described the medium as 'an enchanted window', a transparent and unproblematic *aperture* 'in which everything from the squint of Hughie Green to the smile of Lord Longford might appear'.²² Six years later, signing off as a critic in *Glued to the Box*, James is still describing television in these *faux naïf* terms, even down to the use of the same, spectacularly unoriginal metaphor: 'Television is a medium only in the sense that a window is a medium.'²³ Of course, what James is really describing here is not television at all but his approach to it – precisely as a 'window' out on to anything he chooses to write about. This failure to have developed any real understanding of television as a medium finds a sexist equivalent in the way James habitually confuses actresses with the parts they play. Here he is, for instance, on YTV's *Hadleigh*: 'Hadleigh has taken to himself a wife, played by Hilary Dwyer – one of those leggy jobs with Botticelli

¹⁹ Clive James, *Visions Before Midnight*, Picador, London, 1981, p 16.

²⁰ Clive James, *Glued to the Box*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1983, p 20.

²¹ *ibid*, p 15.

²² *Visions Before Midnight*, p 18.

²³ *Glued to the Box*, p 17.

shoulders and no bra.' At times one could be forgiven for thinking that James's almost wholly impressionistic engagement with television is merely a euphemism for something else: the endless search for homonyms to disguise the repetitiousness of his seeming obsession with the female anatomy ('sensational norks', 'flailing barbettes', 'knockers', 'clinically interesting lordosis', etc, etc).

The question is: how did he get away with it? The answer is simple: it sold newspapers. James's column at its height was said to be worth 10,000 on the *Observer's* circulation. He was employed to be funny and in a sense it just happened that his chosen peg was television. As W Stephen Gilbert has remarked, James was essentially 'a critic for people who were not interested in television'.²⁴ Even so, this still leaves the question of how he actually practised this highly lucrative deception. Again the answer is relatively straightforward: for all his avowed populism, James wrote about television as if he were indeed writing about something else. And the something else was, of course, our old friend literary culture. When, for instance, he seeks to define the qualities required to deal as a critic with the sheer multifariousness of television's output, James instinctively reaches for Keat's formulation of a 'negative capability', an archetypal Romantic concept some 150 years of age and one nowhere used by Keats himself in relation to the *critical* faculty. James also habitually collapses every narrative, however specifically televisual, back into the realist framework of the 'novelistic'. Thus, despite its elaborate distancing devices and deliberately non-naturalistic use of adult actors to play children, Dennis Potter's *Blue Remembered Hills* is challenged on the crass grounds that it is not 'realistic'. Reviewing Jack Pulman's 1972 adaptation of *War and Peace*, James only seems capable of registering his response by recording how much more moved he has been by other cultural experiences, all of them clearly regarded as *de rigueur* for his kind of man of letters: Titian, Beethoven, Shakespeare, Dante, Michelangelo, Mozart, Verdi and Marianne Moore are all conjured up in a quite ludicrous bout of name-dropping. (Elsewhere, in an equally absurd piece of over-inflation²⁵, Rilke is used to elucidate *The Likely Lads*). A contrasting pantheon drawn from popular culture – again highly revealing – is available should stronger disapproval require expression: in the case of *War and Peace*, it included Mary Renault, Sid James, Barbara Windsor and Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm. Inevitably, the best that could be hoped from the television version was that it would 'drive' viewers back to the original. Incidentally, this is also a piece which leaves one wondering how James ever acquired his mysterious reputation as a wit, a writer of gusto and comic invention. This is his clichéd and terminologically archaic attempt at delineating Tolstoy: 'the entire vista of human experience is lit up'. Then again, we should perhaps expect anything from a writer whose grasp of logic is such that he can write of a television programme that it was 'so unsophisticated that it could hardly be said to exist'.

It has to be said, however, that James is often disarmingly honest. He makes no attempt to disguise the fact that he can hardly believe his luck

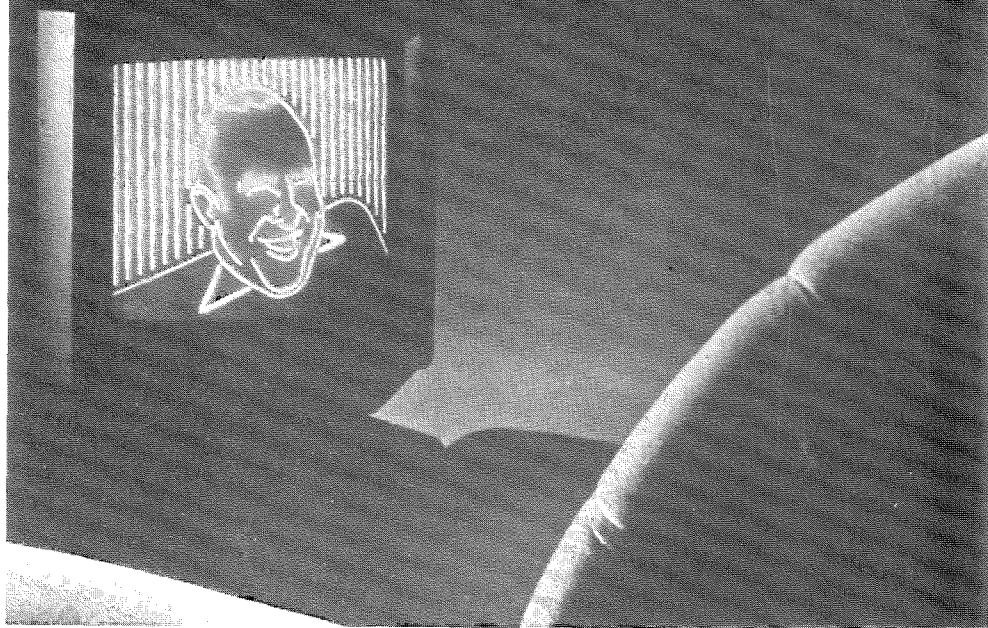
²⁴ W Stephen Gilbert, *op cit.*

²⁵ The titles of James's first two volumes of collected criticism, *Visions Before Midnight* and *The Crystal Bucket* are both inappropriately grandiose 'quotations' from the obscurer reaches of English Literature – from, respectively, the seventeenth-century essayist Thomas Browne and the Elizabethan poet-adventurer Walter Raleigh. The third, *Glued to the Box* contains an epigraph from the French poet and polemicist, Charles Péguy.

PICADOR

Clive James

Visions
Before
Midnight



at having been able to make such an impact from an armchair at home within easy reach of 'the thin mints'. In this respect, it's tempting to see the jacket illustration to the paperback edition of *Visions Before Midnight* – James's own image picked out on a television screen being reflected back to an empty armchair – as an elaborate joke at just about everyone's expense. Here is a man who knows full well that his real subject is not television but himself. And should the ego ever be found wanting or the mask of personality slip, there's always the paraphrastic stand-by: the ghosting of whatever it is you've been watching and its reformulation as comment with the assistance of, say, a few judicious theatricalisms – good/bad acting (drama); revealing physiognomy (documentary); comic range (sit-com). None of which precludes the odd journalistic rush of blood to the head, as when James once described a particularly gutless and sychophantic Desmond Wilcox documentary about tabloid giant Hugh Cudlipp as 'a miracle of unrelieved adoration . . . the self-promotion coup of the year'. The point being that James in the end is no more objectionable than any other critic of the medium. In fact, the reason why I have dwelt on him at such length is precisely because, despite the exaggerated persona, he is so *typical* of the profession. In his literariness ('a metropolitan critic in the tradition of Hazlitt' according to Oxford Professor of English John Bayley), his impressionism, his oscillation between personality and paraphrase and his refusal to acknowledge a specifically televisual language, he could indeed lay some claim to being British television's most representative critic.

James's cleverdickery is most closely matched by the more appealing idiosyncrasy of Nancy Banks-Smith's long-standing column in the *Guardian*, which, despite its theatricality and minimal interest in television as any kind of issue, still occasionally manages to be illuminating – in a quirkily demystificatory way – about individual programmes. Temperamentally, however, his closest cousins are to be found in the weeklies: John Naughton in the *Listener*, Richard Ingrams in the *Spectator* and Benny Green in *Punch*. Along with James's successor at the *Observer*, Julian Barnes (himself an ex-weekly columnist), these writers are all highly opinionated and pride themselves on keeping aloof from the general ruck of journalistic previewing. (It is a matter of some debate as to whether Ingrams actually possesses a television set.) Like James, they are, in Meaghan Morris's memorable phrase, 'gut'²⁶ men – as in 'gut reaction' – critics whose criteria are mostly of the visceral variety; untroubled by any consideration of television's aesthetic, structural or social specificity, they simply know what they like. They occupy, to put it more politely, the subjectivist universe of 'taste' where every critical judgement becomes of necessity an act of consumption, almost literally a question of palate.

It is no coincidence that Naughton, for instance, has constructed a *bon viveur* persona for himself as critic and that its recurrent props include references to himself watching television with the ultimate in *digestifs* – brandy and cigars. In one sense this might be seen as an appropriate comment on television's consumerist orientation – Naughton's uncon-

²⁶Meaghan Morris,
op cit, p 53.

scious, as it were, playing tricks on him. But there's also something highly conscious at work here that runs counter to this. For another of the elements that go to make up the *Listener* critic's persona is the comic *hauteur* of the 'gentleman' (an affected liking for Trollope, veteran cars and other assorted historical throwbacks), something clearly designed to signal *distance* from modern consumerist styles. Naughton can always be relied on to adhere to some previous mode of production, especially in matters literary. Thus, while being astute enough to recognise that there are now 'two cultures . . . literary and (tele)visual',²⁷ he typically can only proceed by endorsing the former at the expense of the latter: television is responsible, we are asked to believe, for whole 'generations of kids who have to all extent and purposes, stopped "reading"' ('viewing', it is claimed, 'develops no skills') and it is therefore an 'illusion that, somehow, television has a civilising influence on our society'. This equation of what is 'civilising' exclusively with literary values—essentially early Leavis, unmodified by the subsequent media explosion—is all the more remarkable coming as it does from a writer who has a close professional involvement with the new information technology (Naughton teaches Systems Analysis at the Open University). But it makes the general point nicely: whatever his personal, professional or political commitments, when he puts on his cap as television critic, Naughton, like virtually all his colleagues in the field, immediately comes under the sway of a powerful literary tradition.

Few of the weeklies escape the twin pull of either personality journalism or literary slumming. The *New Statesman*, which prides itself on its coverage of media politics, still employs critics like William Boyd, whose idea of a response to *Brideshead Revisited* was to write a lengthy appraisal of the original *novel* spiced with the odd aside about 'good' acting and direction. *New Society*, very keen of late to re-establish contact with popular culture, introduces a television column only to give it *Punch*'s serious-funny-man-on-politics, Simon Hoggart. The dailies surprisingly, or perhaps not so surprisingly given their journalistic rather than literary traditions, have a better record when it comes to producing critics properly attuned to the cultural specificity of the televisual. The two most widely respected television critics both inside and outside the industry are undoubtedly the *Guardian*'s Peter Fiddick and the *Financial Times*'s Chris Dunkley. Fiddick's review column—run alternately with Nancy Banks-Smith's—together with longer, feature-length articles, have over the past decade regularly provided Fleet Street's most informed coverage of the structural, institutional and industrial forces that lie behind the making both of individual programmes and of the policy decisions that ultimately regulate them. No other critic with a mass readership understands the *workings* of television better, even if one often feels that over the years Fiddick has had to fence-sit in order to maintain his 'inside' sources.

Dunkley, however, is the more accomplished critic, bringing an impressive generic sense of television's forms to bear on the appraisal of programme output. He's been helped in this by the largest column any-

where in the daily press – a legacy he inherited from his predecessor T C Worsley in 1973. Unlike Worsley, a theatre critic who only began to write about television because of an incapacitating illness and who relied exclusively on critical criteria developed in an entirely different context, Dunkley has evolved a genuinely televisual perspective. In this sense he can be said to have followed Worsley's programmatic advice in his collected criticism, *The Ephemeral Art*, to the effect that an 'adequate critical approach' would have to involve 'analysing the attempts of the medium to discover and develop its own forms'²⁸. What Dunkley lacks is intellectual credibility. Too often his column hangs on a shoddily put together argument or an over-worked, inappropriately portentous catch-all precept like 'the human condition' (a favourite phrase – *Boys from the Blackstuff* was, for instance, said to be 'about' it). Thus, having argued influentially in favour of a Fourth Channel in the late '70s and frequently taken issue with notions of broadcasting 'balance', Dunkley could be found – once the new channel finally went on air – lamenting the *absence* of balance – albeit differently defined – and hysterically accusing C4 staff of 'institutionalising policies hideously similar to those of the Third Reich and the South African government'.²⁹ What he was objecting to were programmes made by all-women, all-black and all-Asian groups, such as *Broadside*, *Black on Black* and *Eastern Eye*, which in hopelessly hyper-inflated language he described as constituting 'a new fascism'. The absurdity of the argument was matched only by its ramshackle logic and wilful misreading of history. What but prejudice masquerading as liberal humanism, one is tempted to ask, could ever equate the attempt of C4 to give a voice to minority groups with the attempts of fascist dictatorships to do precisely the opposite, namely to suppress all ethnicity and minority opinion? More recently, and as if to draw attention to the essential shallowness of his thinking, Dunkley has been complaining of a 'shortage of fun on British television', of an 'emphasis on the glum, ignoble and melancholy aspects of life'.³⁰ Though the *Financial Times* reports it daily, news of Britain's worst social and political crisis for 50 years obviously hasn't reached him yet.

To move from the 'quality' dailies to the tabloids isn't just to move to a more 'popular' perspective. It's also to encounter a different gender balance: women, spectacularly excluded from television criticism in all but a handful of the 'qualities', are suddenly in a majority (Mary Kenny and Liz Cowley at the *Mail*, Margaret Forwood at the *Sun*, Hilary Kingsley and Ann Pacey at the *Mirror*, Nina Myskow at the *People*, Judith Simons at the *Express* and Bronwen Balmforth at the *Star*). This may in part have something to do with what Dorothy Hobson³¹ has identified as the different way in which women in certain social classes use television. It certainly reflects women's standing as a group in journalism, inasmuch as there seem to be a number of assumptions at work here about the 'suitability' of women writers to handle television in the kind of gossipy, star-struck fashion that is the hallmark of the tabloid's coverage. If television criticism in the 'qualities' occupies the realm of the Symbolic, dominated by Law as represented by a literary tradition

²⁸ TC Worsley, *The Ephemeral Art*, Alan Ross, London, 1970 p 12. As the title hints, Worsley also thought that the sheer multifariousness of television made it doubtful that criticism of it 'in any serious or schematic sense' was possible.

²⁹ *Financial Times*, November 24, 1982.

³⁰ *Financial Times*, September 28, 1983.

³¹ Dorothy Hobson, *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera*, Methuen, London, 1982.

and the Father as represented by men, in the tabloids it occupies the realm of the Imaginary, at once more concerned with the immediate pleasures afforded by the medium, particularly those associated with narrative and the complex identifications it offers.

Here, though, it is necessary to draw a distinction between 'heavy' tabloids like the *Mail* and the London *Evening Standard*, and more down-market titles such as the *Mirror* and *Sun*. It would be difficult, for instance, to ignore a patriarchal presence in Mary Kenny's heavily moralistic column in the *Mail*, with its pious cocktail of Catholic new conservatism and revisionist feminism. Conversely, Lucy Hughes-Hallet in the *Standard* consistently matches the 'qualities' in her seriousness, her support for minority programming and her willingness, in a growingly right-wing newspaper, to raise issues about, say, television's representation of women or, in the case of Mike Leigh's *Meantime*, class bias. The *Mail* and the *Standard* are, in fact, placed transitionally and somewhat uneasily between the 'qualities' and the tabloids proper, capable, as it were, of looking both ways at once. Thus, they also make use of a more showbusiness-oriented approach – exemplified in the work of writers like Liz Cowley, Geoffrey Phillips and Ray Connolly. The most representative 'transitional' critic is the *Mail's* principal television writer, Herbert Kretzmer, who has a background in theatre and as a showbusiness journalist and lyricist. Yet the *Mail*, for all its more rabid transformations of late, remains, as far as television is concerned, the paper of Peter Black (traditionally employing more TV writers than any other daily), and Kretzmer's concerns and general readiness to engage critically with television may ultimately be said to differ little from those of critics on the 'qualities'.

The tabloids proper (the *Sun*, *Mirror*, *People* etc.) all feed off television as a star system, a provider of endless celebrities – 'personality' journalism here means journalism *about* personalities, not by them. This leads to much greater stress on the use of pictorial material – photographs of 'stars' or production stills – with much of the writing being effectively extended captioning. These pictures – or, as is often the case, publicity poses – hardly differ at all from the kind of glamour photography to be found elsewhere in the tabloids and are one of the principal means through which television enters their *general* discourse. As indicated earlier, the ease with which the tabloids transform television into news – and front-page news at that – is one of their defining characteristics. Thus, while television may often appear to circulate merely as part of another narrative – of celebrity, say, or sexuality – it is frequently precisely its own, self-contained narrativity that makes news – as in 'Elsie Leaves The Street'. And, in the end, for all its deficiencies and manipulations, who is to say that this fluidity of approach, in its approximation to the more or less 'imaginary' manner in which we all consume television, isn't as reliable a guide to the actual experience of watching television as many a more upmarket critical attempt to decode it at the level of the 'Symbolic'.

This article began by drawing attention to television criticism as a dis-

course of retrospection that had instituted a stylistic distance between itself and its object of analysis – a distance open to all kinds of exploitation and responsible for most of television criticism's inherent weaknesses as a writing practice. We can now add that it is also an institutional discourse and a culturally subordinate one, which habitually talks about television in terms of something else, in view of some *other* discourse – literature, theatre, journalism, etc. The end result is thus inevitably also a disabling *structural* distance from its object. This translates itself practically into an inability to intervene effectively in what is always the *ongoing* debate about television's future. ITV didn't survive because it got critical support but because it 'discovered' the successful genre formats of the US networks. Snooker was more help to BBC2 than the critics in getting the new channel established as part of the accepted geography of British television. Equally, and in many ways even more strikingly, Channel 4 has received relatively scant critical encouragement and nothing like enough to sustain it in its 'distinctive and innovative' brief. Indeed, when, in the autumn of 1983, the IBA banned Ken Loach's *A Question of Leadership*, no major critic sought to defend the films or even to write about the case at any length. It was left to Loach himself to mount a debate on the issues involved in the opinion and letters pages of the *Guardian*.

Given this kind of example, it is difficult to be sanguine about the ability or the willingness of television criticism as presently constituted to police the steadily rightward drift of the consensus inside television and the routine censorship already arriving in its wake; nor, for that matter, in its capacity to see the wood from the trees where the coming cable-led fragmentation of delivery systems is concerned. On the other hand, it also has to be stressed that the television industry has itself played no small part in nurturing this critical state of affairs, that in the end it prefers ineffectualness to scrutiny and that really it would be much happier if all television criticism became a species of promotion. However, while television may well get the criticism it deserves, what is ultimately at stake is not so much the kind of criticism television should get as the kind of *television* criticism should demand. That is the real critical project – and as yet it has hardly begun.

ECONOMIC CHANGE IN THE US TELEVISION INDUSTRY

DOUGLAS GOMERY EXAMINES THE
INFLUENCE OF SATELLITES AND
SUPERSTATIONS ON A PUTATIVE
REVOLUTION IN COMMUNICATIONS

The television industry in the United States has long provided daily entertainment to millions. The programming networks, the American Broadcasting Companies (ABC), CBS (formerly the Columbia Broadcasting System), and the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), tender news, soap operas, comedies, dramas, sports, and other fare through affiliated stations to more than eighty million homes. Each day these companies dominate broadcast schedules throughout the USA. The three networks perform four functions: they rent programmes from outside suppliers, produce their own shows (news, sports, *Today*, *Good Morning America*), relay these programmes to affiliates, and sell commercial time (advertisements) to be shown - during breaks in the programme schedule. Such business practice is traditionally labelled a broker operation. It is this power as distributor of programmes which provides the three US networks with the core of their economic potency.

In terms of profit accumulation, the three US television networks function as subsidiaries within larger corporate structures. The ABC Television Network is but one division of American Broadcasting Companies, Incorporated. American Broadcasting represents the most television-oriented of the three, gaining more than half its revenues from network operations and ownership of five television stations. The remainder of American

Broadcasting's revenues come from four radio networks, thirteen radio stations, and such magazines as *High Fidelity* and *Modern Photography*. Less than three per cent of corporate revenues come from other miscellaneous entertainment-related enterprises including a fledgling movie company (*Young Doctors in Love*). CBS Inc is about twice the size of American Broadcasting (in terms of assets, 2.5 billion dollars to 1.5 billion dollars), but is far more diversified. Only one-third of corporate revenues come from its television network and ownership of television stations. Fully one-half of its revenues come from the production and sale of records and tapes (the Columbia Record and Tape Club is the world's largest mail order distribution of recorded music), and the publication of books (Praeger; Holt, Rinehart & Winston) and magazines (*Woman's Day*, *Cuisine*, *Family Weekly*). ABC and CBS are parts of media conglomerates; NBC, in contrast, is part of a mixed conglomerate, the RCA Corporation. RCA engages in a wide variety of economic activity - from car rental (Hertz) to food processing (Banquet) to the manufacture of electronic equipment for military and civilian purposes. NBC, as a television network, represents less than one-tenth of the revenues of RCA. Like the other two networks, NBC also owns and operates five VHF television stations, as well as AM and FM radio stations. RCA matches CBS Inc with a powerful record

division. But overall, RCA towers above its corporate competitors with more assets than the other two combined, and greater diversity through its manufacture and sales of electronics hardware. RCA alone can gather profits from a number of different concerns whereas CBS and American Broadcasting are dependent on the success of their television networks to accumulate profits.¹

The three television networks interconnect stations for common and simultaneous distribution of programmes and advertising. The network formally acts as a 'middleman' among local stations, programme producers, and advertisers. Central to the creation of *three* (not four or two) US television networks has been the Federal Communication Commission's long-time station allocation policy. For 30 years the FCC has sought to provide local stations in as many communities as possible. Some 70 markets (where the bulk of the profits are made) have precisely three commercial VHF channels. (Only fourteen have more than three.) Most smaller US cities have but one or two VHF channels. This allocation scheme, completed in the early 1950s, has, more than anything else, constrained the number of networks to three. Affiliation with UHF channels has been avoided by the networks at all costs, given the smaller coverage area and poorer picture quality.

Thus, in most US television viewing areas there are but three 'eligible' stations for the three national television networks. Affiliations established 25 years ago have been maintained to this day. (There were a number of switches in the 1970s when ABC, momentarily, surpassed CBS as the most watched network.) Neither the stations nor the networks have room to manoeuvre to obtain a bargaining advantage. There are no viable alternatives. In the long run, the advantages of network brokerage usually outweigh the disadvantages to a station of having

to carry a given programme that does not maximise audience share (and hence profits) in the particular market. Network affiliation—even with the weakest alternative, currently NBC—provides the safest, surest path to profits.² One study, offering a rare peek at actual corporate data, found that between 1964 and 1976 network income increased 575 per cent (some 44 per cent per year) while payments to affiliates rose only 34 per cent (some 3 per cent per year).³

The television networks have innovated various techniques to garner maximum revenues. During the past two decades, wholly sponsored programmes have given way to a 'magazine'-type advertising format. Advertising slots are presently sold much in the same way as they are in US newspapers and magazines. That is, the network procures the programmes, and sells advertising slots to the highest bidder. In recent years, by halving the standard advertising slot from 60 to 30 seconds, the networks doubled the amount of 'goods' they have to sell. Coupled with volume discounts, network television advertising is far and away the most effective way for large retail corporations to mount a coordinated national sales campaign. Viewers have taken note of this 'commercial clutter', complaining to poll takers and making this the number one 'problem' with US television.

But it is with certain programming that most Americans identify the three television networks. Evening prime-time viewing options—for the vast majority of Americans—are dominated by ABC, CBS and NBC. But so are other (less-heavily watched) viewing periods. Affiliates devote about two-thirds of total television time to network-fed programmes. (Much of the remaining affiliate non-news time is filled with re-runs of material first presented on the

¹ Information about these three corporations was obtained from annual reports and 10-K reports to the Security and Exchange Commission. Basic information can also be found in Knowledge Industry Publications, *The Knowledge Industry 200–1983 Edition: America's Two Hundred Largest Media and Information Companies*, White Plains, New York, Knowledge Industry Publications, 1983, pp 29–31, 55–57, and 274–276.

² The fourteen markets with an alternative, commercial VHF channel are New York (1st in size), Los Angeles (2nd), Chicago (3rd), San Francisco (5th), Washington, D.C. (8th), Dallas (9th), Miami (13th), Minnesota (14th), Seattle (15th), St Louis (18th), Denver (19th), Portland, Oregon (23rd), Indianapolis (24th), and Phoenix, Arizona (25th). See Vane A Jones, *North American Radio-TV Station Guide—14th Edition*, Indianapolis, Howard W Sams & Co., 1981, and Arbitron Ratings, *ADI Market Rankings—1983–84*, New York, Control Data Corporation, 1983.

³ Benjamin Compagn (ed), *Who Owns the Media?*, New York, Harmony Books, 1979, pp 102–115.

64 networks.) Network control of programming began in earnest in the late 1950s when the 'magazine concept' of advertising began to replace wholly-created sponsored programmes. That – plus the quiz show rigging scandals – pushed ABC, CBS and NBC to seek greater control over what programmes they presented. At the same time, the giant corporations of the US film industry began to re-allocate idle talent and production space into television series production. By the mid-1960s, programme packagers were presenting finished products to the networks which accounted for more than three-quarters of prime-time programming. The television networks took their present shape as distributors of programmes and sellers of advertising, and thereby minimised their necessary investment and risk, and maximised their profits.⁴

Two groups of corporations now produce most of the programmes for the three networks: (1) the theatrical film companies (MCA-Universal, Twentieth Century-Fox, MGM/UA, Columbia, Paramount and Warner Brothers), and (2) independents (including Lorimar, Embassey, MTM) which rent production facilities. These producers have only three alternative customers: ABC, CBS and NBC. This bilateral oligopoly, with a dozen Hollywood television programmers on one side, and three television networks on the other side of the bargaining table, is really a rather one-sided affair. The programme producers cannot hope to be able to control the first-run distribution of their shows. The only issue for discussion is who will control the revenues from re-runs. Once the costs of a programme series have been sunk, the additional costs to market and sell re-runs is quite low, making potential profits quite high.⁵

The programme supply process was substantially free of specific governmental regulation until 1970. Since then, two important

rules have been passed which materially affect re-runs. The 1973 syndication rule forbids ABC, CBS and NBC from engaging in marketing re-runs (the syndication business) and from sharing in the off-network re-run revenues. The 1972 financial rule prohibits the three networks from acquiring any financial or proprietary right in independently produced programmes except for their network runs in prime time. Together, these are known as the Financial and Syndication Rules. On August 4, 1983, after much dispute, the Federal Communications Commission tentatively decided to lift the rules. The Hollywood corporations pressed their case to the former president of the Screen Actors Guild, Ronald Reagan. On November 2, 1983, Reagan backed Hollywood, and pushed for a two-year moratorium to study changes in the rules. As this article is being written, the debate over control of nearly a billion dollars of re-run rights continues in the US Congress, Justice and Commerce Departments, the Federal Communications Commission and the White House itself.⁶

For more than two decades ABC, CBS and NBC have 'competed' for a television market worth billions of dollars. Indeed, at times it has seemed as if network television has been 'pre-sold', able to count on its audiences. Unlike movies, books and other media, network television seems to have had a guaranteed audience, rising in predictable numbers every hour of every day to a peak (in the tens of millions) at 9 pm. 'Competition' among ABC, CBS and NBC has been a struggle to attract the largest share of that audience in order to be able to charge more for available advertising slots. NBC, often a poor third in the network race in recent years, still manages to accumulate millions of dollars in profits for corporate parent RCA.

In the late 1970s there seems to have begun a tide of change. This 'communications revolution' began with cable television and has moved to subscription television, low-power television, satellite master-antenna television, multipoint distribution services and direct broadcast satellite transmission. By the end of 1983, 40 per cent of US homes should be cabled. (Even more could

⁴ Bruce M Owen, Jack H Beebe, and Willard G Manning, Jr, *Television Economics*, Lexington, MA, Lexington Books, 1974, pp 17-48.

⁵ US Federal Communications Commission, Network Inquiry Special Staff, *Final Report: New Television Networks – Entry Jurisdiction, Ownership and Regulation*, Volume II, Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1980, pp 319-444, and Susan T Eastman et al (eds), *Broadcast Programming: Strategies for Winning Television and Radio Audiences*, Belmont, CA, Wadsworth Publishing, 1981, pp 3-50.

⁶ *Broadcasting*, August 8, 1983, pp 27-30; *Washington Post*, November 3, 1983, pp B1, B6; *Television/Radio Age*, October 24, 1983, p 51; *Wall Street Journal*, November 3, 1983, p 7; USFCC, *Final Report: New Television Networks*, Volume II, pp 307-318.

be attached, but choose not to; only about two-thirds of the potential customers have signed on.) Some 40 new cable networks beam down from satellites 22,500 miles out in space. Each pursues a special segment of the audience with all-movies, sports, news, rock videos, cultural or religious programming. Since wired homes are able to pay directly for what they want, viewers should be moving away from the three television networks to their favourite cable channels. And, so far, that has been the case. Viewers with pay-cable options watch more television than those without it. On certain nights, Home Box Office (the leading movie channel, owned by Time, Inc) outdraws the networks in homes with that pay-cable option. Consequently, the network's share of the total audience has been declining. (However, their audience count remains approximately equal to the total of the late 1970s because of population growth.) Between the 1974-75 season and for the 1981-82 television season (September to March), consistently, 60 per cent of American homes watched television each night. But in that time, however, the three networks' share of the prime-time audience has declined from 93 to 81 per cent. Put another way, in the 1979-80 season, an average of 39.4 million viewers watched any given minute of prime-time network television. Three years later the number had fallen to 38.3 million. The most recent evidence is mixed, but does seem to indicate that the decline has halted. In some areas, during daytime in particular, the networks seem to have recaptured some of their 'lost' audience. No one is sure whether a decline will begin again, however.

Still, by any measure, the networks continue to dominate. There is big television (the networks) and little television (the new technologies, principally pay-cable). So, in 1981, the three networks were being watched in 38.8 million homes on a typical evening, while the various pay-cable networks were tuned in by 1.6 million homes. CBS alone averaged 14.3 million homes per minute during that year, while the highest-rated cable service, WTBS—the superstation of Turner Broadcasting, Atlanta—averaged less than one-half million. Indeed, there seem to be only two institutions which have had any measured ability to woo audiences away from ABC, CBS and NBC. The programming substitutes can be grouped in the following categories:

- (1) Independent television stations
- (2) Pay-cable movie channels, dominated by Time's Home Box Office (HBO).⁷

In 1983, there were 179 independent television stations programming without access to ABC, CBS or NBC. As a general rule, the more populated the city (for example, New York, Los Angeles or Chicago), the greater the number of independent stations. Smaller markets have none. Such stations offer re-runs of series previously shown on the networks (so-called off-network series), older feature films, syndicated game and talk shows, local sports, and a small amount of news and public affairs. On average, audiences of the independent stations do not match those of network affiliates, and as such, advertising revenues are less. But offsetting lower revenues are the much lower costs of re-runs. Independents do best when they counter-programme affiliate rivals. Some studies indicate that more than two-fifths of revenues are realised from advertising slots sold for programmes broadcast from 6 to 8 pm. The reasons are two-fold. From 6 to 7.30 pm, most network affiliates present news. Independents counter with popular re-runs (*Lucy*, *Andy Griffith*, *Happy Days*). From 7.30 to 8 pm, network affiliates cannot schedule network shows, or off-network re-runs, and so must turn to game shows. These limitations are government-imposed as part of anti-network rules passed in 1972 (the so-called Prime Time Access Rule). Independents show off-network re-runs, principally *M*A*S*H*, and have made millions of dollars for themselves (and Twentieth Century-Fox, *M*A*S*H*'s producer).

In the 1980s independent stations increased their revenues more than 20 per cent per year. The number of stations has also conspicuously risen, nearly doubling since the mid-1970s. Optimists predict the number of independent stations could top 200 by the end of this decade. That would bring the total to a figure equal to

⁷ *Television/Radio Age*, October 24, 1983, p 5; *Television/Radio Age*, June 20, 1983, pp 42-43; *Television/Radio Age*, January 3, 1983, pp 53-54; *Wall Street Journal*, February 3, 1983, p 33. Two useful surveys of the cable and other new television technologies can be found in Thomas F Baldwin and D Stevens McVoy, *Cable Communication*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice Hall, 1983 and Lynne Schafer Gross, *The New Television Technologies*, Dubuque, William C Brown Publishers, 1983.

66 the number of stations affiliated with one network. Surveys show that more and more viewers are turning to independent stations. In competitive markets, four of five adult viewers watch some programming on independents each week. Programming has changed. For the 1983-84 television season an *ad hoc* network of independent stations, led by giant Metromedia, has taken two network cancelled shows, ABC's *Too Close for Comfort*, and NBC's *Fame* and, for the first time, created new episodes and presented them on a weekly basis. If this experiment succeeds, then some sort of fourth network—made up of independent stations in larger US cities—could arise to challenge seriously the long-standing triad of ABC, CBS and NBC.⁸

Independent stations also thrive on cable. The cable 'network' hooked into the most US television sets is an independent station, Channel 17 from Atlanta, Georgia. This so-called 'superstation' flows into more than 25,000,000 homes. Owned and operated by Turner Broadcasting Service, WTBS offers a variety of older movies, sports, off-network re-runs and news. Indeed, motion pictures constitute half of an average day's programming. Sporting events involving the Turner-owned Atlanta Braves baseball team and the Atlanta Hawks basketball team plus off-network re-runs makes up the rest. There are two other 'superstations': WGN from Chicago (10,000,000 subscribers), and WOR from New York (5,000,000 subscribers). The superstation phenomenon began in 1976 when Ted Turner agreed to distribute his struggling Atlanta station via satellite to four cable affiliates with less than 20,000 subscribers. Today, superstations rank with movie channels as cable's profitable services. For 1983 WTBS expects to earn a profit of between 35 and 40 million dollars on revenues of 130 million.⁹

Independent stations, including superstations, generate revenues by selling advertising time. Pay-cable channels have no advertisements.

Instead, they charge viewers directly for their services. And available data clearly point out what customers want—motion pictures. In 1972, Time, Inc, the billion dollar media conglomerate, started its Home Box Office network. HBO would offer feature films—uncut and not interrupted by advertising—to cable homes for a flat monthly fee, regardless of how often the subscriber watched. Specials by popular musical artists were gradually added. In 1975, Time, Inc committed 7.5 million dollars for a five-year contract to enable HBO to transmit on RCA's Satcom I satellite. Quickly, the service grew in popularity. In 1975, when HBO went on the satellite, its subscribers totalled nearly 300,000; eight years later, the list had increased to 12,500,000—a more than forty-fold increase in eight years. HBO is fully three times larger than its nearest pay-cable rival.

HBO's rise to power captured an important market away from the six major Hollywood studios. Almost overnight, Time, Inc has become one of the larger financiers of Hollywood motion pictures. Including investments in theatrical features and licensing fees for older films, HBO is expected to spend close to 250 million dollars in 1983. The charges paid by subscribers for movies at home has increased tenfold in the past ten years, to more than 2.4 million dollars, fully half as much as Hollywood takes in at the theatrical box-office. And revenues from pay cable have been growing at a rate twenty times box-office ticket sales. Time, Inc, has done well by its new subsidiary. In 1982, the corporation earned more than 160 million dollars, before taxes, from its video enterprises, compared with barely 100 million in profits from its more famous magazine and publishing ventures. And Time, Inc, has expanded its video operations. With CBS and Columbia Pictures it has formed Tri-Star Pictures, with the stated ambition of becoming Hollywood's seventh major studio. With 400 million dollars—half from the three partners and half from a line of credit—Tri-Star plan to make twelve to eighteen features per year. Its first announced movie is *The Natural* with Robert Redford. HBO is also bankrolling 24 made-for-pay-cable films, which will receive their 'world premières' on HBO. It remains to be seen how well all these HBO investments will do, but, regardless, the enterprise has successfully siphoned away viewers from ABC,

⁸ Laurence Zuckerman and Les Brown, 'Autumn of the Network's Reign', *Channels*, vol 3 no 3 (September-October 1983), pp 45-48; *Broadcasting*, June 27, 1983, pp 49-71; *Television/Radio Age*, January 25, 1982, p 49.

⁹ *Cablevision*, August 29, 1983, p 57; *Broadcasting*, June 27, 1983, pp 68-70; *Television/Radio Age*, January 25, 1982, pp 67-75.

CBS and NBC.¹⁰

In sum, I argue that in the 'communications revolution' only independent television stations and movie channels have so far provided an attractive substitute to ABC, CBS and NBC. Other cable services have yet to make a significant impact. This so-called revolution has only been an extension of the familiar. HBO simply offers movies after they are shown in theatres, and before they appear – re-edited and interrupted by advertisements – on network television. HBO has, in short, become the second-run movie house for America. Independent stations expand this love-affair with movies on television. WTBS, WGN, and WOR function like repertory houses, repeating the best and worst of Hollywood productions made between 1930 and 1980. Independents also play off America's love for sports and past television programmes. Indeed, they also function like repertory theatres for television. If the attractions of HBO, independent stations and superstations are not new, their means of distribution via satellite (rather than microwave relay and 'phone-lines) suggests a leap forward. Satellite distribution significantly lowers costs through economies of scale. These lower costs have enabled Time, Turner and the other corporations to prosper, after a short period of losses associated with the start-up of their 'networks'.

ABC, CBS and NBC have not stood idly by as they lost viewers. All have begun their own cable services. In this arena they have only met with failure, however. CBS announced CBS Cable in 1980 to present a high-quality cultural service with revenues obtained through advertising. Offerings included classical music, jazz, ballet and documentaries. The service consistently lost money and was shut down in September 1982. Total losses topped 50 million dollars.¹¹

RCA, NBC's parent corporation, did no better. It entered the cable fray with The Entertainment Channel (TEC). The cornerstone

of this new service was BBC programming. Other offerings included Broadway plays and musicals, and selected foreign films. The Entertainment Channel closed down in February 1983 with vague plans of being revived as an advertising service. In nine months of operation, only 50,000 subscribers signed up. Losses matched CBS Cable's estimate of 50 million.¹²

ABC has actually been able to stay in business. Its ARTS service, jointly done with the Hearst Corporation, is, for the present time, the cultural survivor. ARTS presents a wide range of fine arts, music, opera, dance and drama. It has about 12,000,000 subscribers. ABC and Hearst's other joint venture, Daytime, reaches 10,000,000 with a magazine format of segments: (1) 'self-help', (2) 'relationships', (3) 'the home' and (4) 'contemporary issues'. A third effort, the Satellite News Channel, closed down in October 1983. Turner Broadcasting bought out the Satellite News Channel's partners, ABC and the Westinghouse Corporation, for 25 million dollars. Turner's Cable News Network remains as the sole cable news service. The Satellite News Channel lost its partners nearly 80 million dollars.¹³

So, for the present, ABC, CBS and NBC will continue making millions through network television. They will work to meet the challenges of HBO and the superstations. The networks' own experience has proved that other specialised cable channels, principally cultural services aimed at the rich, lose millions of dollars. Will there be more changes in the future? Will the 1980s, not the 1970s, be the decade which signals the demise of the three-network oligopoly? No evidence suggests this. The three networks should continue to be the dominant US television institutions well into the 1990s. On the margin, groups of independent stations (Metromedia, The Tribune Company, Taft Broadcasting, Turner Broadcasting), and HBO (Time, Inc) can, at best, hope to gather in a quarter of total advertising and pay-TV dollars. The US television industry still awaits its communications revolution.

¹⁰ *Broadcasting*, November 15, 1982, pp 48-68; *Wall Street Journal*, November 8, 1982, pp 1, 24; *Washington Post*, April 17, 1983, pp L1, L3; *Cablevision*, August 8, 1983, pp 30-36.

¹¹ *Broadcasting*, May 19, 1980, pp 31-32; *Television/Radio Age*, February 9, 1981, p 51; *Broadcasting*, September 20, 1982, p 27; *Cablevision*, September 27, 1982, pp 13, 62.

¹² *Television/Radio Age*, February 9, 1981, pp 50-51; *Broadcasting*, February 28, 1983, p 44; *Cablevision* March 7, 1983, p 15.

¹³ *Cablevision*, October 17, 1983, pp 18-20; *Multi-Channel News*, October 17, 1983, pp 1, 59.

A NASTY STORY

JULIAN PETLEY TRACES THE EVOLUTION OF A MORAL PANIC

The video nasty affair began in 1981 with complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority from the British Videogram Association and members of the public about the gruesome nature of the advertising (cassette covers, posters in video shops, pages in video magazines) for certain cassettes. The ASA upheld complaints against advertisements for *Cannibal Holocaust*, *Driller Killer* and *S.S. Experiment Camp*, and the main video magazine editors agreed joint standards on advertising. It was these various forms of advertising, then, that first aroused the moralists' wrath and so it could be argued with some justification that the video industry (or at least those sections of it eager for a quick profit at any price) was itself partly to blame for the moral panic soon to be whipped up by the National Viewers and Listeners Association, the tabloid press, teachers, churchmen and others. Ironically, of course, in its early days that moral panic served to increase enormously the sales and rentals of video 'nasties' by bringing their existence to wide public attention and arousing curiosity in the uninitiated.

The first article about the supposed threat to children posed by their easy access to video cassettes of all kinds appeared in the *Daily Mail* on May 12, 1982, although this was not specifically about violent or horrific cassettes. However, it is premonitory in a number of ways. Firstly it features the soon-to-become-familiar figure of the Concerned Teacher; indeed, the way in which large sections of the teaching profession, supposedly in the business of fostering minds capable of rational debate and independent thought, have hitched themselves up to, and thoroughly encouraged a nauseatingly emotive crusade with distinctly repressive overtones, is one of the more revealing features

of the video nasty affair. Secondly, it cites, very briefly, a report by America's National Institute of Mental Health which says the evidence is *overwhelming* that TV violence leads to aggressive behaviour in young people. Of course, it is not, but throughout the campaign it has been taken as read, as a given, that there is a direct causal link between violence on screen and violence in real life. In fact, there is *no* evidence that has not been seriously challenged to suggest any such link at all and, furthermore, there is absolutely no onus on those who dispute the existence of this supposed link to prove that it *does not* exist, anymore than there is on those who do not believe in flying saucers to *disprove* their existence.

The first major articles about horror videos in particular appeared in the *Sunday Times* on May 23, 1982, the *Daily Mail* on May 28 and the *Sunday Times* on May 30. The gist of all three articles was that a new kind of extremely violent horror film had become available on cassette, 'films which specialise in sadism, mutilation and cannibalism' (*Sunday Times*, May 30), films which show 'castration, sadistic attacks on women, and violence including the use of chain saws and electric drills' (*Mail*). The articles also revealed that the Metropolitan Police Obscene Publications Squad had seized a copy of *S.S. Experiment Camp* and sent a report to the Director of Public Prosecutions with a view to a prosecution under the obscenity laws which until then had been used only against pornographic videos. The British Board of Film Censors and the BVA were setting up a working party to devise a classification scheme for videos similar to that used in cinemas; once this was done the BVA would urge its members not to handle unclassified product. The *Mail* quoted Lord Chief Justice Lane's maiden speech in the Lords



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Advertisement in the British trade magazine, *Video Business*.

70 earlier that year warning that people were faced with 'positive incentives' to commit crimes in imitation of violent scenes 'depicted on various screens of all sizes'. The second *Sunday Times* article mentioned that the video of *Snuff* had been withdrawn by its British distributor as a result of its exposure in the previous week's article, even though no threat of prosecution had been made—an interesting prefigurement of more recent developments in which increased but inconsistent police action coupled with the effects of press hysteria have combined to induce dealers to withdraw titles *before* any police action has been taken against them. Similarly premonitory is the same article's lumping together as video nasties *Don't Answer the Phone* (released in cinemas with an X certificate) and *S.S. Experiment Camp* (which undoubtedly would not be allowed to be shown in cinemas at all). Already, then, there was a problem of (lack of) definition; a video nasty is not, apparently, simply a video of a film too violent to be given an X. As the saga progressed, the term 'video nasty' became synonymous with the term 'horror film'.

The day following the second *Sunday Times* article, the *Times* reported NVLA campaigner Mary Whitehouse as stating that the setting up of the joint BBFC/BVA working party gave rise to 'more rather than less anxiety', pointing out the presence on it of Lord Harlech, head of the BBFC, which had passed material for showing in cinemas 'which would give rise to concern if shown on videograms'. There are two important points to note here. Firstly, the NVLA's lobbying on the issue of video nasties is an object lesson in How To Do It (though of course it must be borne in mind that large sections of our 'free' press would be firmly closed to causes that SEFT and its members would support). Secondly, Whitehouse's statement is the first indication that what is being sought is *stricter* censorship of video than film. Furthermore, the eradication of video nasties is by no means the NVLA's sole, or even major, aim; 'Mrs Whitehouse urged the Government to introduce "new and effective obscenity laws" to meet what she called the "growing threat" from video cassettes.'

By early June of '82 the first of a growing stream of questions were being asked in both houses of Parliament (and by no means all from Tories). Government replies at this time indicate

a clear preference for leaving the industry to put its own house in order by means of the proposed classification scheme.

On June 6, the *Sunday Times* reported that the Obscene Publications Squad had sent the - Director of Public Prosecutions, Sir Thomas Hetherington, copies of *S.S. Experiment Camp*, *I Spit on Your Grave*, and *Driller Killer* for possible prosecution. It quoted the squad's Detective Superintendent Kruger as stating 'we want to know where we should draw the line. This is a new problem for us, and we need to know where we stand.' By July 8, the *Sunday Times* was reporting that the DPP was going ahead with these prosecutions and explained the options open to him: a case under section three of the Obscene Publications Act, which allows for forfeiture under a magistrate's warrant, or under section two, which involves a full criminal trial before a jury, with a possible maximum sentence of three years imprisonment. Not surprisingly, Whitehouse immediately began to campaign for a prosecution under section two. The *Guardian* (July 9) quoted her as saying that 'even if a prosecution before a jury failed it would bring home to the Government the urgent need for legislation to control material which can be seen by children in the home' while in the *Times* (July 17) she argued that prosecutions 'at least ... will indicate whether the present obscene publications legislation can deal with material of this kind'.

In the event, the DPP opted for proceedings under section three against *Driller Killer*, *I Spit on Your Grave*, *Death Trap* (which had in fact been released in cinemas, but in a slightly cut version), *Cannibal Holocaust* and *S.S. Experiment Camp*. Mary Whitehouse called the decision a 'public scandal'. The cases against *Driller Killer* and *Death Trap* were heard at Willesden Magistrates Court on July 31, resulting in their distributor, VIPCO, forfeiting all their copies. Whitehouse branded the proceedings a farce and called on Hetherington to resign. However, Stephen Woller from the DPP described the prosecutions under section three as exceptional, a statement reinforced afterwards by a spokesman for the DPP, who said that the forfeiture order gave distributors a clear warning that violent cassettes could be classified as obscene under the terms of the OPA and would in future be prosecuted under section two. VIPCO maintained that they had handled the films in

good faith but simply had not known where the line should be drawn. As the situation became more hysterical, and police action more indiscriminate, distributors and retailers alike were to look with increasing favour on that line being drawn – even by statutory regulation.

By then the video nasty moral panic was well established. The only Fleet Street commentator to sound a note of warning about the possible consequences was Alexander Walker in the *Evening Standard* on August 19, in an article entitled 'The Video Inspector Cometh'. Noting that children viewing horror videos was now generally regarded as 'the last step on the road to national degeneracy, depravity and corruption', Walker suggested that 'the risks to children have been (and are being) exaggerated'. Complaining of attempts to 'safeguard our morality' and 'tell people what's good for them and what's bad for them', Walker warned, very presciently, of 'a new form of censorship being extended to what we wish to show in our living-rooms'.

By September 24, 1982, the cases against *I Spit on Your Grave*, *Cannibal Holocaust* and *S.S. Experiment Camp* had been heard and their distributors found guilty under section three of the OPA. Notice had been served that future prosecutions would proceed under section two, and the police were gearing themselves up for future action in expectation of an increasing number of complaints from the public. Questions in the Commons continued, and on December 15 Gareth Wardell, Labour Member for Gower, introduced, with all-party backing, a bill under the ten minute rule 'to prohibit the rental of video cassettes of adult category to children and young persons'. Again, it needs to be stressed that Wardell was not concerned only with videos like *S.S. Experiment Camp*, but also films which had been X certificated for cinema screenings. To back up his case, he quoted part of the Independent Broadcasting Authority code which states that 'scenes which may unsettle young children need special care. Insecurity is less tolerable for a child – particularly an emotionally unstable child – than it is for a mature adult. Research evidence shows that the socially or emotionally insecure individual, particularly if adolescent, is specially vulnerable. A civilised society pays special attention to its weaker members.' The bill was ordered to be read a second time on February 18, 1983. However, it failed to get Government approval

and was dropped.

This was followed by the *Mail's* famous 'We Must Protect Our Children Now' article on February 25 and the beginning of its Ban the Sadist Videos campaign.¹ What is important in the present context is that the article concluded with a savage attack on Home Secretary William Whitelaw's unwillingness to support Wardell's proposed statutory measures and his 'pious hope' for voluntary restraint and adherence to the BBFC/BVA classification system.

On March 2, the *Telegraph* revealed, that in a letter replying to Mary Whitehouse's request for new obscenity legislation, Margaret Thatcher had stated that 'like you I deplore those who seek to profit out of exploiting the weakness of others, and in doing so undermine our traditional standards of decency and respect for family life'. (The Threatened Family is a familiar theme in the video nasty saga, which here overlaps with the Victorian Values issue: in particular the spectre of children watching horror videos seems to have upset a certain traditional ideology of 'childhood'.) And it was at this time that Whitehouse came up with her masterstroke: the idea of screening video nasties to MPs as a means of hastening new legislation. The *Mail* of March 3 quotes her thus: 'I am convinced the vast majority of Members of Parliament do not know the depths to which this material goes because they haven't seen it... Let them see what we are talking about. A lot might be sick.'

By the beginning of April '83, Norman Abbott of the BVA was concerned that because of the growing hysteria and pressure on MPs the Government would not give the forthcoming voluntary classification scheme a fair chance to prove itself. These fears arose out of Government assurances given to Wardell after the failure of his bill. Interviewed in the April 4 *Broadcast*, Abbott stated: 'The Minister specified that while prepared to wait a *reasonable* time, the Government will go ahead and prepare legislation so there is a ready-made bill prepared in all its pre-legislative details that can be rushed through immediately the Government deems the

¹ For a detailed analysis of this see Michael Armstrong, 'Hysteria and the Nasties', *Films on Screen and Video*, October 1983; and Mary Harron, 'What the Papers Say', *Times Educational Supplement*, October 21, 1983.

voluntary scheme to have failed. The indications are that *reasonable* may only mean months. The Government believes the problem can be controlled in a stroke of the pen but that is impossible whether by our scheme or legislation. The problems of policing will still be exactly the same.' However, the April 8 *Telegraph* revealed that in March Mary Whitehouse had written to all MPs for support and 150 had replied that they would back legislation against video nasties. In the April 11 *Times* Whitehouse was quoted as urging the Tories to include proposals for stricter obscenity laws in their election manifesto; as she put it, 'the forthcoming election and the threat of video nasties has given a new impetus to our campaign'. And, in the event, the Tory manifesto did indeed promise 'specific legislation to deal with... the dangerous spread of violent and obscene video cassettes'.

The industry's classification code was launched on April 14 by the BVA. It was to be administered by the Videogram Standards Council and would be compulsory for all BVA members. From September 1983, all newly released cassettes would have to carry one of the following certificates, as in the cinema: U, PG, 15, 18. Some cassettes would certainly be refused even an 18 certificate, which replaced the X in 1983. Dealers would be required to register with the BVA, and any not doing so by September 1983, or any registered dealer who ignored or broke the terms of the code, would receive no product from BVA members (who represent a majority of cassette producers and distributors). Reaction was mixed; the code was welcomed by the trade but dismissed by Mrs Whitehouse as 'unworkable'. Gareth Wardell feared that specialist firms might be set up simply to produce and distribute 'nasties' outside the BVA ambit.

On May 16 1983, *Broadcast* reported that if the Tories won the election, statutory censorship of videos was highly likely, basing its forecast on remarks by MP Timothy Sainsbury at a VTA meeting in Brighton at which he announced that junior Home Office minister Patrick Mayhew was actively considering proposals for legislation. He called the industry's efforts 'well intentioned' but continued: 'they are not good enough - primarily because they lack the power to ensure that the regulations will be respected. The industry will not be persuaded just by moral arguments or a code of conduct, and respectable

dealers will be damaged by outlets that ignore the system.' In response, Norman Abbott pointed out the probability of undesirable and unintended side effects of Government legislation; the imposition of a clumsy and unworkable system leading to a tightening of censorship in general. However, Derek Mann of the Video Traders Association, representing those at the sharp end of increasing police action, said that although voluntary classification was a step in the right direction, 'government legislation may not be a bad thing for the retailer'.

The increasing impossibility of rational debate on the subject was illustrated by Press and NVLA reaction to the making of Broadside's *A Gentleman's Agreement* for Channel 4 in June '83. Mrs Whitehouse wrote to the DPP expressing concern that clips (quite inoffensive) from certain 'nasties' were to be shown. This was followed by a letter from the DPP to the Channel warning that showing clips might constitute contempt of court, as these films were facing prosecution under the OPA in various magistrates' courts. However, Channel 4 and the IBA decided that they were protected under the Contempt Act, which allows 'matters of public interest which only incidentally impinge on particular proceedings'.

Having blithely assumed and asserted all along that there was a direct causal link between screen violence and real-life violence, the newspapers got their 'proof' in the form of the 'video rapist' case first reported by the *London Standard* on June 27. This was followed by other similar cases over the summer (until, of course, the press could feast on the real life of multiple murderer Dennis Nilsen). Just as in the *Clockwork Orange* affair years before, a sensation-hungry press proved a godsend to many a defence counsel desperately seeking mitigating circumstances in a clearly hopeless case - or even a brief moment of fame for himself. The various cases are well documented by Armstrong and Harron, but two points need emphasising. Firstly, the utter ludicrousness of the 'arguments' now being put forward; for instance in the 'video rapist' case, the defendant argued that watching video nasties had convinced him that women were likely to fall in love with their assailants. However, the particular video cited - *I Spit on Your Grave* - actually shows the victim castrating and murdering her assailants!² Secondly, videos

dragged up as mitigation in other cases included *The Wanderers* and *The Thing*, both X certificated general release films. Meanwhile police continued to seize an extraordinarily wide range of material, some of it X certificated for cinema showing. By this time the term 'video nasty' had unmistakably become synonymous simply with 'horror film'.

All this, allied with stories of children as young as six watching video nasties, cassettes for rent at 50p, businesses run by gangsters with shooters and so on, further fuelled MPs' and their constituents' demands for statutory controls. Gareth Wardell proposed a motion 'that this House urges Her Majesty's Government to introduce forthwith legislation to control access by children to video nasties, thus honouring its election manifesto pledge' (to which Dennis Skinner proposed an amendment, adding 'because it is recognised that the free flow of market forces and the pursuit of the profit motive is a dangerous economic policy that has to be challenged, curbed and controlled'). During Prime Minister's question time on June 30, Thatcher stated that 'it is not enough to have voluntary regulation. We must bring in a ban to regulate the matter.' And on the same day Home Secretary Leon Brittan stated in a written answer that 'I am not satisfied with the current state of the law. The Government fully accept the need for more effective control of the sale and rental of objectionable video cassettes, as we made clear in our election manifesto. I welcome the proposed introduction by the video industry of voluntary controls, but I do not consider that, by themselves, such controls will be sufficient. There will certainly have to be statutory controls and I am urgently considering what form they should take.' On July 1, the *Scotsman* announced that 'a draft bill which has almost been completed by the Home Office is now expected to be taken up by a Conservative backbencher who... topped the ballot for private members bills.' This turned out to be Graham Bright. (The use of the device of the private member's

bill demonstrated the Government's desire for speed, as it circumvented any need to consult with the video industry.)

On July 14, Bright outlined the main features of his bill to the press. In effect, it would outlaw the selling or hiring of any cassette which has not been approved by a central censorship authority (generally assumed to be the BBFC); offenders would face fines of up to £10,000 and possibly up to two years imprisonment. It would also be an offence to sell or rent to a child a video classified as suitable only for adults. It was envisaged that BBFC classifications would have to be given the force of law, which its cinema classifications do not at the moment possess.³ The Home Secretary would have power to regulate the fees charged by the censorship body but the government would not fund the classification process, expected to cost between £200-£500 per title. (This, more than anything else discussed here, is bound to have the consequence of seriously limiting the number of cassettes of any kind released.) Certain cassettes would be banned outright. Classification of newly released titles would begin by the end of 1984, though classification of existing ones could take a couple of years. Yet on July 15, the *Guardian* reported Mary Whitehouse's disappointment: 'Mr Bright's bill doesn't go far enough. What is needed is a specific listing of those elements of violence and obscenity which should be deemed illegal.'

The bill was scheduled for its second reading on November 11. (It passed most successfully.) What was necessary in the meantime was to ensure it would be supported on the day, and therefore lobbying and agitation continued apace. Undoubtedly the masterstroke was showing MPs (many of whom have probably never seen a recent X certificated horror film) a farrago of 'nasty bits' from various videos, a quite meaningless mish-mash whose only purpose was to shock them into voting for Bright's bill. Of course, it succeeded admirably and provided the press with a field day. What I want to analyse now, however, are some of the implications of the proposed legislation.

The first has to do with the status of BBFC classifications. At the moment there is uncertainty over whether BBFC cinema classifications are legally binding or merely recommendations. In the July 25 '83 *Broadcast*

² For further discussion of this see Martin Barker, 'How Nasty Are the Nasties?' *New Society*, November 10, 1983.

³ See Beverley Brown, 'A Curious Arrangement', *Screen*, November/December 1982, vol 23 no 5, pp 2-25.

BBFC Secretary James Ferman was quoted as stating that 'the BBFC's classifications for the cinema are legally binding, unless a local authority amends them which it is entitled to do. The local authority's approval makes it binding. The video classification operation, as far as I am aware, will make no difference.' But consider the following case reported in *Video Trade Weekly* three days later, in which a Manchester Crown Court found obscene a cassette of a BBFC X certificated film – *Oriental Blue* – and ordered its destruction. Questioned about this, Ken Penry, Assistant Secretary of the BBFC, stated that 'We give an Advisory rating only – the Board isn't above the law, we have to just hope we've got it right. It's very difficult for us, perhaps if we were a statutory body, we would have more right. If we certified this version of *Oriental Blue* [apparently it was the certified version] then it should be OK under the law, but again, we have no power over individual judges.' According to the BVA, the only way to stop what it called this 'legal anarchy' was to radically alter the BBFC; according to Norman Abbott in the *Guardian* of October 17, it would have to be 'renamed, reconstituted, expanded and made publicly accountable for its policies and decisions'. And, of course, it will have to have statutory powers. But does this mean that the BBFC will then include two mechanisms under one roof – one statutory (video) and one voluntary (cinema exhibition)? If so, is the *Times* of November 5, 1983, correct in its assertion that 'to give it [the BBFC] statutory powers over video, but none over film, would make it a most anomalous hybrid. Perhaps it is time to follow the recommendation of the Williams Committee and create a statutory films board, ending the rule of local authorities in this area.' However, if this path were to be followed, then, to quote Peter Fiddick in the November 4 *Guardian*, it opens the possibility that 'Britain could be heading, for the first time, for a monolithic censorship body with influence in every moving-image medium.'

The second question has to do with the standards of censorship to be imposed. On August 8, *Broadcast* quoted Norman Abbott as complaining that 'Mr Kruger of the Obscene Publications Squad, Mr Bright and the Home Office are now maintaining that we should have a less permissive standard for home video. They

argue that what is seen in the public cinema is seen in a controlled environment, where age limits can be imposed.' It does seem quite extraordinary that it should have taken so long for it to be realised that the only logical and consistent outcome of a system of regulation imposed because of fears arising out of children's easy access to video should be a particularly swingeing form of censorship, far stricter than anything to which cinema films are subject. And Lord Chief Justice Lane took the argument a stage further on the eve of the bill's second reading; the November 9 *Mail* quotes him as stating that 'I find the suggestion that it is only children who should be protected incredible. What our legislators seem not to realise is that it is not merely children who need to be prevented from seeing these frightful publications. There are others upon whom the effects may be even more disastrous. The effect upon that sort of person of this sort of exhibition would be catastrophic. Unless *rigid and rigorous censorship is imposed* . . . it will not be long before these scenes are enacted in real life' (emphasis mine). Meanwhile the *Times* of November 10 carried a letter from Mary Whitehouse and an article by Ronald Butt, both attacking the BBFC, the former for its 'inevitable corruption of judgment' and the latter because it might become 'as progressively hardened by what it processed as it has done with films'.

One can only conclude at the moment of writing (December 2) that the outlook is extremely bleak. Opposition to the media hysteria and the ill-conceived legislation rushed through parliament has been almost non-existent, and the outrage stoked up over video nasties is bound to spill over into other areas of expression. I want to finish by quoting from Alexander Walker's article which so mysteriously 'disappeared' from the later editions of the *Standard* on November 24, 1983. In it he remarks that the video nasty affair has 'succeeded in calling into being all the latent desires endemic in the English national character to impose one's own moral outlook on one's neighbours' private habits. My friends, we are in for such a reign of intolerance as regards publicly imposed morality as I had never even guessed was possible in a country not known for its wisdom in such matters Keep watching your screens: the real horror show is just beginning!



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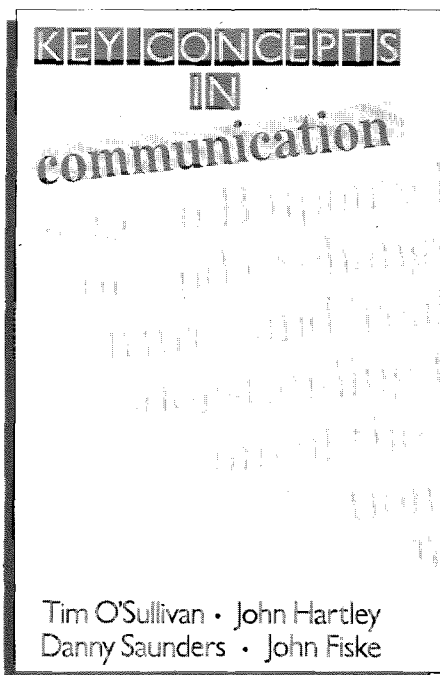
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TELEVISIONING 'TERRORISM'

A REVIEW BY IAN CONNELL

In most respects, the authors of *Televising 'Terrorism'*¹ have turned out a fairly standard, professional piece of work. It processes much the same sort of data, in much the same sort of way, as earlier analyses of the televising of industrial affairs, of political events such as elections, and of a range of other situations and activities that have been, still are in some cases, designated by researchers as serious issues. Like many of these studies this too is a *content analysis*. And why not? Why should the authors have been innovative or offered an analysis of a different kind?

Well, because this study makes a number of claims about the diversity and complexity of televised terrorism that simply could not have been produced in and through the application of the procedures of a content analysis. It is not just that such procedures are incapable of substantiating the claims made—but that they inevitably lead to formulations which actually contradict those claims.

Content analyses typically have a tripartite structure. They usually begin with a categorisation of the content(s) or meaning(s) with which the researchers are concerned. They then proceed to examine the manner (though sometimes, just the extent) of their appearance in particular messages. The third stage, taken to be dependent upon the other two, is concerned with making inferences about the context of the messages, a context that is, more often than not, considered inaccessible by other means: these inferences can be made about the conditions of the production of the message and/or about its consumption and the effects which may follow.

Marina de Camargo once noted that the *a*

priori categorising of contents 'is the peculiarity and the limitation of this technique'². It can be regarded as a limitation because it affects a premature closure of meanings and does so in at least two ways. First of all, the scope of the textual analysis is constrained by the researcher's preceding categorisation: it can attempt to illustrate either (a) the existence 'in' the text of only the predetermined meaning(s), or (b) that only the predetermined meaning(s) exist 'in' the text. In either case, meanings other than those predetermined and categorised cannot register in the analysis. Secondly, textual analysis is a bit like an archaeological dig, as researchers look for those predetermined meanings that appear to be fixed or embedded *in* the text. What such an approach obscures is its own productivity: it *too* is a decoding of a certain, perhaps special kind, *not at all* a neutral extraction of meaning from the text. Moreover, if it is accepted that decoding is productive—a process which takes a structure of signifiers (the text, or some part(s) of it) and produces it as a complex of signs—then we cannot accept as well that meanings are there already 'in' the text. At best, all we can say is that the text is a series of potential meanings, and then ask only what it can or may mean, in the absence of any other kind of analysis.

As already suggested, *Televising 'Terrorism'*

¹ Philip Elliott, Graham Murdock and Philip Schlesinger, *Televising 'Terrorism': Political Violence in Popular Culture*, London, Comedia, 1983.

² Marina de Camargo, 'Ideological Analysis of Messages', *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* no 3, Autumn 1972.

asserts rather than demonstrates relative diversity and complexity. 'Terrorism' and 'terrorist' are, it is said, 'terms which look straightforward, but actually they are shot through with contradictions'³. The authors are critical of Howard Davis and Paul Walton's *Death of a Premier: Consensus and Closure in International News*⁴, a study of the reporting of the assassination of Aldo Moro, because its argument that 'evidence from the reporting of the Moro story in the press and television networks points to a universally assumed consensus'⁵ is so sweeping, and takes little account of the fact that the 'official' perspective on political violence is not the only one in play. Instead, *Televising 'Terrorism'* identifies four such perspectives, categorised as the *official*, the *alternative*, the *populist* (a variant of the official) and the *oppositional* (mainly, it seems, with reference to those social types who advocate each or are their 'key users'). The study specifies that these are 'the four main perspectives on terrorism currently "in play" in political debate'⁶ (implying that there may be others not currently in play in political debate). Furthermore, it is stated that 'throughout this study we treat "terrorism" as a term without a settled definition'⁷, though perhaps it would have been more accurate to say that they treat it as a term with four relatively settled definitions.

This sense of diversity and complexity seems also to be carried over into the discussion of programmes. These are distinguished in terms of their openness or closedness, their tightness and looseness, because of the study's 'discovery ... that presentations of terrorism were a good deal more diverse and complex than simpler assumptions about television's relation to the state and to dominant ideology predict'⁸. Programmes classified as 'relatively closed ... operate mainly or wholly within the terms of reference set by the official perspective', but there are 'other forms [?] ... relatively open in the sense that they provide spaces in which the core assumptions of the official perspective can be interrogated and contested and in which other perspectives can be presented and examined'⁹. The open/closed couple also operates in the study's analysis of 'format'. Thus, a 'tight format is one in which the images, arguments and evidence offered by the programme are organised to converge upon a single preferred

interpretation and where other possible conclusions are marginalised or closed-off. A loose format ... is one where the ambiguities, contradictions and loose-ends generated within the programmes are never fully resolved, leaving the viewer with a choice of interpretations.'¹⁰ So the authors judge complexity and diversity with reference to whether or not programmes express a combination of the perspectives they have categorised, although at the end of the chapter on 'Reporting "Terrorism"' diversity seems to be defined more narrowly, with reference only to 'varying degrees of openness to arguments which depart from official orthodoxy'¹¹. This seems quite sophisticated viewing, and, therefore, one wonders who else is viewing in like manner.

From the introductory remarks it is clear that this will not be a 'full scale' content analysis. It will not deal with *how often* the topic of terrorism appears on British television, nor with how prominently the various perspectives are featured (yet later it is stated that the official perspective is 'the best publicised and most pervasive'). The authors aim, rather more modestly, to demonstrate that not all programmes express only what has been categorised as the official perspective. This is done in relation to a *quota sample* of programmes, that is, a sample with predetermined specifications. The programmes in this sample are said to be 'representative examples', though we are not told in what respects they are so, nor, in fact, what specifications were employed to construct the sample. Thus, when the SAS film *Who Dares Wins* is cited as 'an excellent example of the standard action-adventure format that dominates a good deal of popular television fiction'¹², it is

³ Philip Elliott, et al, op cit, p 1.

⁴ Howard Davis and Paul Walton, 'Death of a Premier: Consensus and Closure in International News', in Howard Davis and Paul Walton (eds), *Language, Image, Media*, Basil Blackwell, 1983.

⁵ *ibid*, p 48.

⁶ Philip Elliott, et al, op cit, p 31.

⁷ *ibid*, p 2.

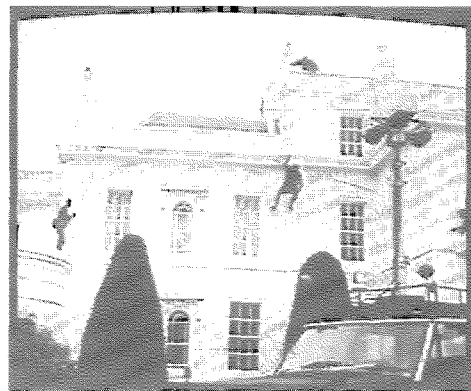
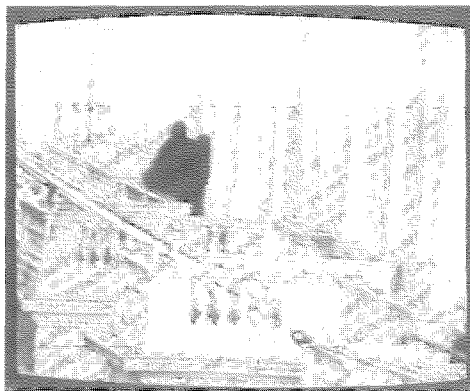
⁸ *ibid*, p 32.

⁹ *ibid*.

¹⁰ *ibid*.

¹¹ *ibid*, p 68.

¹² *ibid*, p 76.



The 'terrorist' siege on TV: left, newscasting from the Iranian embassy – right, fiction on *The Professionals*.

very difficult to know how to respond since the study fails to characterise generally popular TV fiction. Nor do the authors demonstrate that the 'standard action-adventure format ... dominates a good deal of popular television fiction'. How is this to be gauged? With reference to hours devoted to particular genres, or with reference to the composition of actual patterns of viewing? They simply do not say.

Televising 'Terrorism' is, nevertheless, a model – if not full scale – content analysis and effects the various sorts of closures outlined. The authors *discover* that the various texts they have examined express what they have defined as the official perspectives and to a lesser extent the others. These perspectives, it seems, were already in these texts awaiting discovery. There is precious little in the study to suggest that these same texts might be made to mean in other ways and this leads to all sorts of problems when it comes to making inferences. It cannot be denied that these texts can be read as they were by the authors, but it would have been helpful if they had investigated more fully how these particular readings were produced.

The study's four perspectives apparently derive from current political debate, whose participants include 'government ministers, conservative politicians and top security personnel ... certain kinds of intellectuals – notably counter-insurgency theorists, academics and journalists'¹³ (in the case of the official perspective); 'civil libertarians, critical academics and journalists and some politicians'¹⁴ (the alternative perspective); 'the paramilitary loyalist organisations which draw upon a long tradition of militant armed

opposition to a British sellout to Irish nationalism'¹⁵ are described as 'a rich source' of the populist perspective; and, 'those who perform acts of politically-motivated violence, or ... those who either directly speak for them or share their objectives'¹⁶ are said to put forward the oppositional perspective. Yet, as the study progresses, inferences concerning popular culture become more abundant, inferences to the effect that the official perspective and its reactionary populist variant are, in fact, components of popular culture. (Why is it that writing such as this more often than not constructs the popular as either conservative or reactionary?) This culminates in the chapter on 'Dramatising "Terrorism"'.

Here it is proposed that 'commercial pressures operate with a particular force on the popular series and serials ... To attract a mass audience they need to work with images and ideological themes which are already accepted by the widest range of potential viewers. Consequently, they tend to draw most heavily on the official perspective (and on reactionary populism) since these are the best publicised and most pervasive perspectives'¹⁷. (If this is so it is puzzling why counter-insurgents place so much emphasis upon 'winning the propaganda war'.) As if to confirm that the official perspective and the 'already accepted' are one-and-the-same, the authors subsequently say that 'there are few signs of

¹³ *ibid*, p 2.

¹⁴ *ibid*, p 16

¹⁵ *ibid*, p 25.

¹⁶ *ibid*, p 27.

¹⁷ *ibid*, pp 77-78.

large scale popular support in the fight to develop discussion of a highly contentious area which, by raising the question of state repression, inevitably brings to light the contradictions of liberal-democratic politics'¹⁸. Either-orism of this sort prevents the authors extending to popular culture that complexity they have granted to television, to public sector television, in fact.

Suppose we accept the inferences as plausible. What evidence is advanced to support them, and is this evidence adequate? Clearly some it is not at all adequate. The fact of the lack of popular support for that which has been championed by 'sympathetic journalists, some trade-unionists... a scattering of campaigners and odd intellectuals'¹⁹ should not be taken as evidence of support for that which is championed by government ministers and the other 'key users' mentioned, especially when there is growing evidence to suggest a measure of popular disengagement with political debate and its participants²⁰.

Can the authors be suggesting that because something is widely publicised it becomes widely accepted? Surely not, given their critical discussion of 'effects research' relying upon a notion of 'imitation'. Their suggestion that what keeps people watching from week to week (itself contentious in light of continuing research on audience duplication and repeat viewing) is their *identification* with the central characters, is as it stands not much more adequate, since very little

is done to specify the conditions under which 'identification' is possible.

The concluding chapter of *Televising 'Terrorism'* makes some limited use of statistics to demonstrate that "'open" programmes appear far less frequently than "closed" ones and they reach smaller audiences'. But such data cannot be used as evidence for what has been claimed earlier, namely that the official perspective provides the images and ideological themes already accepted by *the widest range* of potential viewers. *The Professionals*, cited by them as an example of a closed programme, has an average, estimated viewership of thirteen million – that is, on average, only a *quarter* of potential viewers (though, admittedly, these figures make no allowances for the changing composition of particular audiences for particular episodes). And though a careful use of this sort of data can begin to tell us something of patterns of viewing, it cannot shed much light on decoding practices. We are left wondering whether any of those taken by the authors to be bearers of 'popular culture' watch as they have inferred or not, and if not, how?

Televising 'Terrorism' is not without points of interest and insight. However the analytic methods adopted are such that these can be developed. There is no way a content analysis of a quota sample of programmes can adequately serve to explain 'political violence in popular culture', unless we assume that these programmes are synonymous with popular culture, an assumption the authors appear, in fact, to make. The book enables the reader to see how a certain group of critical intellectuals have viewed certain programmes, and this is not without interest. But, as with similar studies before, we remain in the dark about everyone else.

¹⁸ *ibid*, p 138.

¹⁹ *ibid*, p 138.

²⁰ See, for example, James Curran and Jean Seton, *Power Without Responsibility*, Fontana, 1981, chapters 16-17.

TALKING HEADS

PHILIP SIMPSON RECONSIDERS THE 'INSIDE TELEVISION' DISCUSSION SERIES

'Inside Television' was a monthly series of ten discussions about television held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 1982-83. Devised and presented by the ICA, *City Limits* and the British Film Institute's Education Department, the series brought together programme-makers, critics, academics and viewers in general to discuss some of the less exposed areas of television: science programmes, nature programmes, sport, multi-national co-productions, children's TV, soap opera, situation comedy and audience assessment. Attempting to provide more than a congenial chat, the organisers promoted the events through a contextualising preview in *City Limits* and specially prepared dossiers of material, often written by the participants, available before the sessions. As one of the organisers, I want to write about the disappointments of the series, not just to pick at the scabs, pleasurable though that can be, but to point up the problems that might be avoided. Enough interest was aroused by 'Inside Television' to make other events on other aspects of television desirable.

The ICA is one of the few locations in central London where seminar meetings are possible; most other likely places turn out to be better suited to exhortation or celebration than an exchange of views. But the ICA has to charge about £1.50 for entrance, so audiences for the series arrived with the conventional expectation of learning from 'experts' or about celebrities, rather than a willingness to pursue an argument. Further, although the sessions were disparate, the series was conceived as a whole and we had expected a greater carry-over of audience. Leaving aside the few academics and journalists

who stayed most of the course, different topics attracted different audiences, with the result that the sessions were often 'inside' something other than TV issues. 'Not in Front of the Children', a session about children's television, provides an example. An audience of about sixty came to hear David Lusted (BFI), Andrea Wonfor (Tyne Tees Television) and Edward Barnes (BBC Head of Children's TV), and six sides of carefully compiled documentation set out some of the issues. Lusted carefully underlined these, but, immediately the discussion turned on anecdotes from experience: the success of *Blue Peter* appeals, the question of news for children, the *Grange Hill* controversies. Despite attempts to expose the assumptions about childhood and the air of defensiveness that lay below these various examples, most participants resolutely stuck to finding more out about what they were already getting than arguments about possible alternatives. When *Grange Hill* or *Blue Peter* were invoked to exemplify innovative or conservative forms, the general point was lost in dull squabbles about how good/bad they were for children. Tacitly, the status quo was endorsed and the practitioners confirmed in their exercise of power.

'Not in Front of the Children', like many of the other sessions, seemed to have an articulate, higher educated, middle-class audience palpably interested in the general area under discussion, but the critical comments they made came from a context of their own 'common sense' understanding of television – an understanding extensively constructed by the medium's presentation of itself in its broadcast and written utterances. The documentation and opening

speakers had been carefully chosen to make possible a challenge to this 'common sense', and some sessions had been strategically placed to make apparent what television's presentation of itself often does not – assumptions about 'the audience' for a programme, the determinations of scheduling, the conservatism of audience 'massification', and so on. But a critical framework was never constructed, and the kind of problematic which informs, say, *Screen*, *City Limits*, and some BFI publications didn't succeed in making the common sense criticisms of the various audiences into a widely shared 'good sense'.

Occasionally, issues *were* out: the tendency of nature programmes to anthropomorphise or narrativise, or to present phenomena as perceptible without any reference to the kind of technology deployed was grudgingly acknowledged after a series of exchanges, only for the more powerful practitioners to propose that 'boring' programmes would inevitably result if they attempted to reveal any of the assumptions behind their practice, or to adopt other approaches. We had hoped that the previous sessions about audience construction, ratings and so on would have enabled *our* audience to see what lay behind such a defence, but the 'nature programmes' audience who had come for this session were almost wholly outside these debates and 'inside' TV nature as pleasure spectacle.

Defensiveness on the part of the practitioners draws attention to another aspect of left television criticism's inability to gain assent: have *Bad News*, *Screen* and *City Limits* made the BBC executives paranoid or have they always been like that? 'Inside Television' confirmed my impression that independent television's practitioners, from a range of levels, are fairly willing (able?) to engage with criticism, whereas those employed at the BBC seem to assume that the barbarians are at the gate and that the drawbridge must be pulled up. Not content to be powerful, the BBC practitioners seem to need to be loved as well, and any invitation to be flexible or self-critical, however tentative, seems to founder on that need or meet with an evocation of their many advisory bodies. Getting tight-lipped about criticism from Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall or even Greg Philo is at least understandable, but, for all the openness of mind

and flexibility of intelligence that some of the BBC's representatives showed, the Corporation would have trouble with Matthew Arnold.

Of the sessions I attended, 'The Multinational Connection: Television and Co-production' best overcame both the common sense to good sense hiatus and corporate defensiveness. Colin Callender of Primetime Television, and Keith Williams, Head of BBC Plays, responded to John Wyver's development of points made in the documentation by Carl Gardner and Mike Poole. His careful exposition of the implications of co-productions, especially their tendency toward conservative, prestige appeal at the expense of representing radical or contradictory views of one nation, was taken up by the small audience for this session, and countered by Williams's account of productions of the latter kind which co-production money at the 'prestige' end of drama made possible. Both he and Callender denied that all co-productions were tailored to a specific but broad cash-market; Primetime's *Nicholas Nickleby* had been sponsored by Mobil on American television, but they had had no direct role in setting up Jim Goddard's re-working of David Edgar's script for the Royal Shakespeare production. Before discussion could get very far on the implications of prestige recyclings of this kind, it was abruptly ended. Nevertheless, both Callender and Williams acknowledged the force of the arguments deployed by Wyver, and the audience were left with a good sense of what to look out for.

Given, then, the two problems of extending the audience familiar with left critical problematics, however general, and the Maginot mentality occasionally displayed by practitioners, what can be done to make more successful forums for discussion between practitioners, critics and a desirably heterogeneous audience? Optimism of the will is necessary but not sufficient, and the conclusions I drew were these: the sessions need to be very cheap if not free, so that participants don't feel they are paying for the (albeit pleasurable) experience of working out a complex issue – the emphasis should be on taking part, not consuming, but this must be implicit, not explicit. Sessions need to be actively chaired because lines of argument don't 'naturally' get pursued in public discussions, and exchange and engagement need to be encouraged rather than position-taking by either side. For

this you need a chairperson with a clear sense of the issues which the organisers want raised rather than a detached 'fairness'. Documentation should help with this, and participants need to use it to *foreground* issues rather than as background information. Television could be used much more to analyse television: a compilation tape of appropriate quotations often helps to establish the *systematic* existence of a feature and might have blocked the tendency for some discussion to settle into a haggle about one instance.

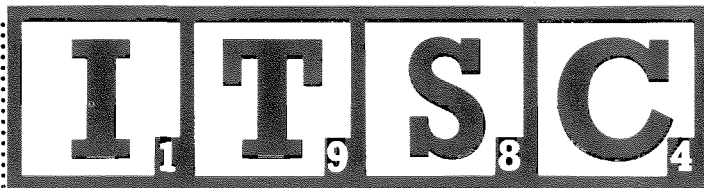
Beyond these minor points, though, may be less mechanistic considerations. Firstly, perhaps we should avoid bringing out the blunderbusses at *every* opportunity; firing off charges of 'bias', 'consensus constructing', 'absences of minority representation' is becoming less effective and only evokes ritual answers now. Trench warfare leaves no room for manoeuvre, let alone change, and the defensive posture of the *powerful* seems to elicit the support of a general, 'uncommitted' audience. Secondly, discussions with practitioners which are intended to make them more reflective about their practice should not only and always happen in public. Organisations like SEFT might ask themselves if an engagement with the BBC and the IBA companies might be made through the advisory

structures set up by these institutions. As it stands, even when these bodies talk to educators, they tend to be subject-specialists or generalists, television users with little familiarity with media theory and criticism. Television theory and criticism provided the perspective for 'Inside Television', but it could also inform closed as well as open discussions.

Finally, where open discussions are set up, it may be best to recognise that changing the critical practices of the audience is as important an objective as changing the production practices of the practitioners. 'Inside Television' didn't really begin to produce audience participants drawn toward the critical problematic set up by most of the key speakers and the documentation. Instead, I fear we delivered audiences to the practitioners who then took away, with some justification, the feeling that they were doing all right by the public at large. Clearly, left critics can and must still work with left audiences, and not many people have their critical awareness transformed in a night. But we also need to think about how we can move *any* audience towards good sense from common sense, to use Gramsci's terms for the last time. Getting inside an audience to do this may be just as useful as getting inside television.

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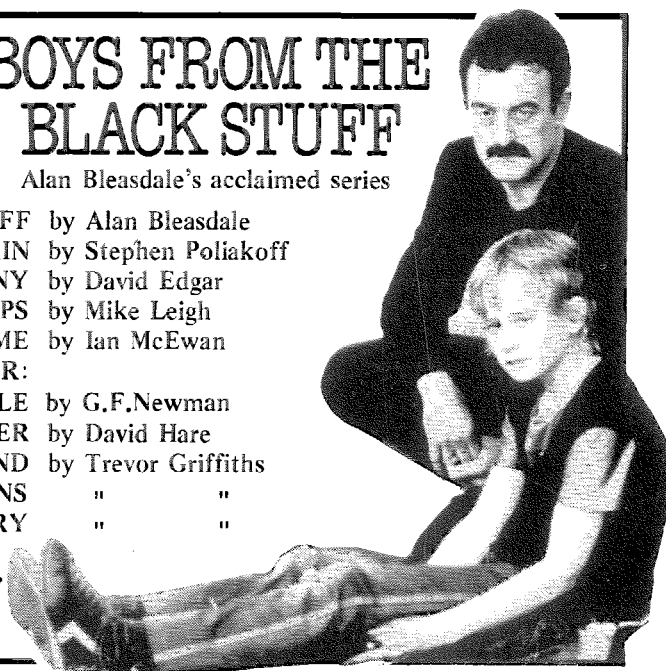
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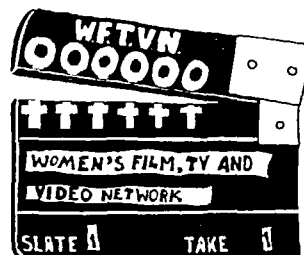
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TV AS INSTITUTION

STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING

BY GILL BRANSTON

Institution is one of several examples . . . of a noun of action or process which became . . . a general and abstract noun describing something apparently objective and systematic . . .

Perhaps nobody has yet said 'I am determined not to be determined' but this illustrates the actual range [of the word 'determination'] . . .

Raymond Williams, *Keywords*

¹ See Roy Stafford, 'Media Studies or Manpower Services?', *Screen* May-June, 1983, vol 24 no 3, pp 74-76.

THE TERM 'INSTITUTION' can offer leverage for historical and materialist understandings of the development and operations of film and television. With its conceptual reach, it might also enable us to address areas such as cable, information technology and satellite TV which are presently arriving on the agenda of debate in terms of either economic pessimism or technological razzle-dazzle. Yet, although there is now a sizeable body of work around media institutions (and many more teaching materials which *could* be turned in that direction), there still seems to be an absence of such teaching in schools and Further Education – for obvious reasons. With education generally shocked and eroded by cuts, and Manpower Services Commission schemes altering the acceptable face of Media and General Studies on a huge scale¹, even interested sections of an exhausted and demoralised teaching force will rarely be able to find time or space in which to grasp 'institution' and find instances for teaching it.

If all concepts are abstract, this one certainly seems more abstract than others. The complex interactions of concrete and habitual bodies of power it addresses make it seem even more 'invisible' as a teaching concept than, say, 'industry'. Even where the term is used, existing meanings tend to close down the play around determinations which is one of the most valuable gains of the approach. This article should be read as a contribution to work intended to circulate those gains more widely. Because of the tentative nature of this project, I've tried to offer two broad ways of teaching 'institution': a direct approach, where the

space exists, and suggestions for less direct, more opportunistic, teaching, via general concepts like 'representation', or through the various categories of TV (news, science programmes, 'regions') currently studied in other contexts. To be effective, of course, such a project demands the transformation of our own institutions (or perhaps formations) so as to facilitate a flow of theory, and to find ways of popularising, teaching and then learning from such work within the institutionalised schooling system.

But why study 'institution' rather than a number of other concepts which seem to provide adequate understandings of film and TV? While texts form an indispensable focus for most media teaching, 'institution' might shift such work away from two important approaches: text-centredness (even when located within a 'text/con-text' emphasis), and 'industry', with the residual sense of mere constraint which is often present. It is important to be able to address questions of ownership and control, but on its own this can simply confirm those longings for a domineering conspiracy which some students seem to feel, and which can easily be fed by absenting from teaching the contradictory play of the needs of media institutions.

However, in attempting to raise questions around 'institution', a problem arises: the fact that, as used in dominant sociology (and in some areas of film theory, and of 'common sense') the term has acquired a deadly inertia, with a very heavy emphasis on the nightmare weight and persistence of human institutions, and on their near total institutionalising powers, and very little on agency, or on the institutional change and contradiction which inheres in different practices. The problem with such an over-totalising approach to any system is that it generates:

a resort to positives completely outside it; magically over-individualised (into) personal qualities....²

This polarity, fixed in terms like 'creative'/'commercial', has informed much left debate on TV, and especially cable.

If these are some of the problems, what of the possibilities? Both historical duration and what Giddens calls the 'spatial "breadth" of these practices'³ (my emphasis) are involved in thinking around 'institution'. So we'd need to shift the term to situate TV *within* relations of social power: to understand its own power as, at one and the same time, material and discursive; to emphasise that media operations are structured laterally, as a consequence of their interrelatedness with other, different and themselves changing forces, and also temporally, historically, as a consequence of the reinforcing effect which one set of practices has on another. This would help account for sedimentation, the lodging of certain powerful norms within TV – the 'objectivity' ethos of news, for example – but would also understand these *and* the potential for change in TV as related to the shifting power of other institutions, to the peculiar nature of 'the culture industries' and to the successes of struggling formations. We might consider the different departments of TV, for example, and how feasible it is to work within/against their norms.

² Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, London, Verso, 1979, p 253.

³ Anthony Giddens, *Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory*, London, Macmillan 1982, p 36.

Thus, though Drama, at the moment, can accommodate formations such as Loach-Garnett, it is almost impossible to conceive of such work within TV News, defined as it is in relation to quite different bodies and traditions of power.

To confirm this other potential of 'determination' as active, we need also to find ways of emphasising unevennesses within television. If the commonsense use of 'institutionalised' endorses the teeth-gritting routines of any set of practices which have been established for long enough, we need to demonstrate that not all practices within TV are formally enshrined, nor do they all command the same degree of allegiance or commitment, and indeed that the central imperative – popularity, ratings – can lead down many wayward paths. To show this might locate some of the pressure points and geological flaws in the sedimentation of attitudes, as well as in the central project of an 'entertaining' TV, through which change can be made volatile.

Teaching television as institution, then, involves asking why programmes are as they are, under what conditions they are produced and read, and also requires relating TV to larger, different bodies of power. Teachers would work from the connection of three areas:⁴

1) the material arrangement of the TV industry, i.e. the histories, technologies, relations of ownership and control of people engaged in making a particular and peculiar commodity – the TV programme.

2) approaches established *within* TV (for example, what makes a 'good' news or drama programme) which at the same time emerge out of broadcasting histories and quite other bodies of power in the case of self-censorship *and* have material effects on the arrangement of buildings, studios, personnel, etc.

3) established approaches *to* TV by a whole critical apparatus which prepares us to read its products in certain ways. Again, this third area needs to be seen as already built in to media practitioners' assumptions, and as having material effects not only on 'normative' ideas but about good and bad TV, 'the audience', what constitutes acceptable discourse, etc, but also, on studio allocations, budgets, promotions, power.

If TV as institution can be broached directly it is probably best taught through 'key moments' which render visible and dramatise the processes of history and of decisions, choices, but which can also 'make strange' the 'accustomed now'⁵ of TV by putting it back into history. This creation of a memory of earlier norms so that existing, very powerful 'standards' can be questioned and unpacked might enable *enjoyable* exploration of alternative and oppositional forms within a discussion of the normative practices of TV. (It could also transform the technicist emphases of much 'practical video', with the attendant despondency about the product of the school studio.⁶) The study of key moments will necessarily involve a sense of history as being far more than one damned thing after another, the inventions/inspirations of a series of 'great men' or a series of clearly demarcated stories. At the same time we need to avoid the temptation to over-prove the case, getting bogged down in historical detail (though we should make that detail more readily available for student research). A helpful strategy is to teach these

⁴ As outlined by David Lusted, 'Media Education and the Secondary/FE Curriculum', *Media Education Conference 1981: A Report*, British Film Institute Education, 1982, pp 13-26.

⁵ Stuart Marshall, 'Television/Video: Technology/Forms', *Afterimage* no 8/9, 1981.

⁶ See Bob Ferguson, 'Practical Work and Pedagogy', *Screen Education* no 38, Spring 1981, pp 41-55.

⁷ Manuel Alvarado and Bob Ferguson, 'The Curriculum, Media Studies and Discursivity', *Screen* May-June 1983, vol 24 no 3, p.30.

⁸ John Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982.

moments via contextualised simulations: they're fun, and can spark curiosity about the original, and origins, of the situation being re-enacted. Adequate contextualisation is as important as pleasure precisely because without it the pleasurable curiosity can be disappointed. As Alvarado and Ferguson point out,

*The sort of educational theories which are necessary are those which recognise abstraction and which are precisely aware of the constraints of lived experience.*⁷

The specific nature of TV as institution can be clarified by first approaching its difference from cinema, and then moving into work on early moments of cinema. TV is often assumed to be a sort of diluted version of cinema. To consider how the experience of each takes place, and has come about, immediately raises the question of different interrelations of pleasure, economics, technology and industry. Students can be asked to list any differences they can think of between cinema and TV. The teacher would work from the oppositions employed in John Ellis's *Visible Fictions*:⁸

CINEMA

- 1) Cinema-goers purchase the right to attend a single film, screened in public, outside the home. Prepared by widespread circulation of narrative, star, genre images. A 'special event', usually discussed afterwards.
- 2) Image is large scalé, detailed, viewed in conditions of darkness, i.e. though 'in public', viewer's 'private' responses cannot be observed.

TV

- 1) TV signals available to anyone who owns or rents a TV set. Received in domestic surroundings, usually interrupted, and not repeated. Some preparation via star, genre images. Not usually a 'special event'.
- 2) Image is small scale, low definition, the sound crucial to alerting and holding the attention. Responses can be seen. Glance rather than gaze usual form of attention.

But these technical/material conditions also involve, produce and have been produced by, formal norms and practices, some of them inherited from previous entertainment forms. Thus:

- 3) The address is to a curious spectator at a 'special event'; is often geared to a couple seeking entertainment outside the home
- 3) Less need to be memorable, more to continuously fill the screen, keep the finger off the channel button. Addresses

(and thus concerned to offer pleasures not obtainable from TV, at least in the last 30 years or so).

- 4) Tightly organised, concise narrative; often centres on a problem or mystery; demands fairly detailed attention. (Comparison with short stories possible.)

a particular family unit (see ads, budget items etc) which composes actually only 5% of families.

- 4) Open-ended forms: soap opera, series with number of variations of same problem in each episode. Typical unit short segment, a few minutes long, for a short burst of attention.

An examination can then begin of the ways in which conditions of consumption are visible in the forms that TV and cinema take. This can be further developed by using Noel Burch's *Correction Please*⁹ with its play on notions of how the cinema came to be as it has been for most of its existence. The film stages the same episode in the different styles of an emerging institution. The first staged sequence can be shown, and its strangeness used to explore students' irritation with what they usually take to be an inept, frustrating, 'badly done' bit of filming. Having explored the strength of those normative assumptions, the soundtrack of this section, which includes fairground noises as well as the 'lecturer's' voice-over, can move discussion away from suppositions of incompetence and into questions of a certain type of circulation, and related possibilities for technologies, acting styles, narrative play etc, given the level of audience revenue and interests which could be assumed to fund them. Students can then watch the last, 'modern' staged sequence of the same scene and note all the differences they see in terms of:

- a) camera positioning;
- b) camera movement;
- c) sound, and its effect for the diegesis;
- d) the 'pacing' of shots, and its relation to the place of women in the film;
- e) the related area of lighting;
- f) montage, and its meanings here.

Immediately, of course, the form/content opposition is usefully challenged, since the 'same' action takes place in both stagings, but transformed by the resources in play at different moments. The later sequence looks 'professional' (if still rather strange) and it is the assumptions built into this 'professionalism' which can now be investigated.¹⁰ The same sorts of contextualised comparisons can be applied to other textually available and significant moments.

Similar work on the founding 'moment' of British TV can be done using, for example, Frank Abbott's film *Workers' Playtime* and the accompanying interview in *Screen*¹¹, or by just nimbly appropriating sections of TV's own nostalgic accounts of its own histories¹². Again,

⁹ Available for hire from the Arts Council of Great Britain, on film or VHS.

¹⁰ A more orthodox approach might be to take a scene from an eminently 'cinematic' film – perhaps the section from *Citizen Kane* where Susan finally storms out of Xanadu – and ask students to rewrite it for TV, using two or three cameras. We could then 'come at' earlier histories from this opposite 'direction'.

¹¹ Mick Eaton, Steve Neale, 'On the Air', *Screen* Jan-Feb 1983, vol 24 no 1, pp 62-70.

¹² See, for example, *Magic Rays of Light*, BBC, 1980, *Visions of Change*, BBC, 1983 or any number of 'anniversary' celebrations, as cuts make new programmes more costly.

¹³See Philip Corrigan, *The Moment of English TV*, unpublished dissertation, Polytechnic of Central London, 1981.

¹⁴See Tony Pearson, 'Teaching Television', *Screen* May-June 1983, vol 24 no 3, pp 35-43.

¹⁵Richard Paterson, 'To the Limits of Ordinary Address', BFI Summer School compilation, 1982, p 1.

difference may spark discussion of 'good' and 'bad' broadcasting, both then and now, and raise questions of circulation, industry and audience.

In certain contexts the problems of dating 'the moment of TV' can be broached¹³, not in the interests of an abstract chronology, but of showing how institutions do emerge, are formed, not only around potentially profitable technologies and existing powers for the realisation of that profit, but also through other struggles and indeterminacies: in 1936, uncertainty about possible legal restrictions if TV were used as transmission; TV's unsure relationship to cinema (evident in the persistence of public TV screenings as late as the '50s) which 'settled' partly by the increasing privatisation of people's lives into family consumer units; the 'certain' decision to give the monopoly to the BBC because it already existed and had a working relationship with the Post Office via telegraphy etc.

A second key moment, the formation of ITV, can be introduced with contextualised scheduling games. Here the dominant rhetoric around the diversity of British TV can be undermined by the game's display of a competitive duopoly at work. Students might play the game once, then meet as programme controllers to discuss the unexpected popularity (or failure) of particular programmes as expressed in the ratings figures, and possibly also as related to companies' advertising charges. It can also be played for BBC2, under slightly different conditions, and the important debates around 'popular' and 'high cultural' TV prised open. In exploring such moments, the 'institution' approach could challenge Ladybird history as a series of neat little stories, but could nevertheless retain the sense that there *are* decisive moments in the processes of history, at which qualitatively new institutions do emerge. What matters is how we understand these beginnings (and endings).

Simulations also provide a way in to the daily working practices of TV, and it is here, rather than as an exceptional occurrence, that we can best approach censorship.¹⁴ This could be built into scheduling games through discussions of whether or not to show a 'sexy' but contentious current affairs programme which may pull audiences but also governmental wrath. The mechanism of 'referral upwards' might be used, or students alerted to the ways that routine scheduling ploys – the Family Viewing Policy, 'balancing' discussions, shunting controversial programmes into insomniac ghettos – can operate as censorship. So can financial controls via the license fee, or, increasingly it seems, allegations of incompetence, amateurishness. One of the central points of such work would be that open censorship is brought to bear only on limit cases, and that limits are sustained rather subtly in British broadcasting. Centrally placed is the legal requirement of 'balance', and the power of certain voices, such as the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, to become powerful 'locators of unacceptability'.¹⁵ Here it might be possible, though explosive, to address the moral panic of the moment – video nasties, and the ways that their location in a compound of unspeakability precludes any differentiation, either within them, or back across into more mainstream products and their own varieties of sexism,

militarism etc.¹⁶

Students are generally fascinated by the whole area of censorship, and it is important to introduce a sense of the problems faced by censoring mechanisms, as well as the inherent 'leakiness' of *popular* forms. Against the regularities of self-censorship we can pose the difficulty of editing out the lift of an eyebrow, or a vocal inflection of scorn, or the loophole drily exposed by Tony Garnett:

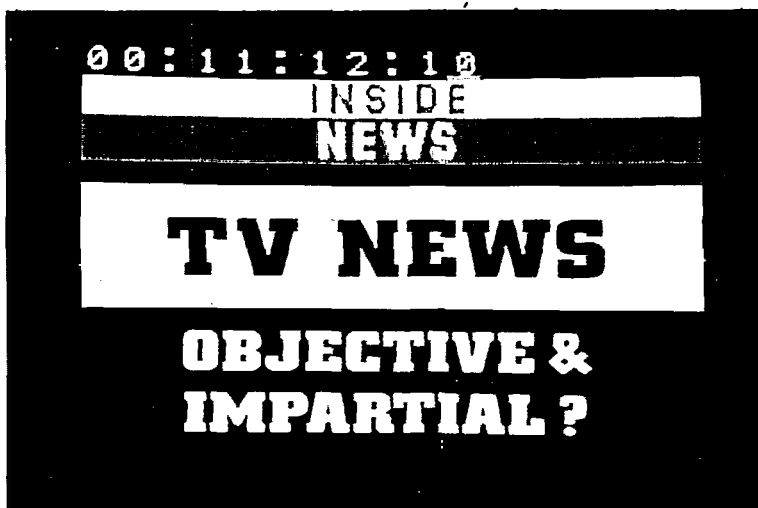
*I always obey the rules. The BBC rule is that you refer upwards when in doubt. I am seldom in doubt. I don't play games. I simply believe management are much too busy with their enormous problems to be concerned with my small preoccupations.*¹⁷

And again, though the popular genres of TV do produce an effect of 'frames', agendas for understanding, it seems likely that messages can reach audiences from many different parts of this brimming system. So a series like *Harry's Game*, in its representation of Republican Belfast, may affect or modify audience understandings of that area as represented in TV news. Precisely because news of Northern Ireland is among the most scrutinised and censored of all TV areas, representation tends to settle into a bare, limited and predictable discourse. However, the TV crime-thriller series, driven by the generic imperative to seek out novelty, difference, has here raided, as it were, from news, scenes which are saturated with difference in terms of the TV news codes on which they depend for their marketable charge of authenticity. Again, the institution (particularly in the bondings of genre) produces contradiction as well as confirmation, and discussion of this can also be brought into teaching.

The second area of TV as institution—attitudes *within* TV—clearly overlaps with the first, but is perhaps best taught separately because of its particular stress on the *material* effects of working assumptions. Here

¹⁶See Martin Barker, 'How Nasty are the Nasties?', *New Society*, November 10, 1983, for a useful discussion of the area in relation to censorship, moral panics and New Right conceptions of childhood, and David Lusted, 'Feeding the Panic and Breaking the Cycle—'Popular TV and Schoolchildren'', *Screen* Nov-Dec 1983, vol 24 no 6, pp 81-93.

¹⁷Quoted in Paterson, *op cit*, p 5.



TV news as teaching aid: *The Friday Alternative*.

news simulation work could bring out ways in which broadcasting, as presently organised, drives journalists into working assumptions inherited almost unquestioned from a range of other established practices and institutions. These assumptions in turn are prime determinants on what gets classified as 'news'. The grip of these orthodoxies might also be loosened by means of code-breaking exercises, initially around news and interviewing.¹⁸ The sadly-missed *Friday Alternative* used to be helpful here, with its startling use of freeze-frame, graphics, music, voice-overs instead of presenters, jokes and, most relevant, its insistence that media reporting of items be part of that news itself, with the implication that reporting itself has material effects and is part of the same world which it is usually said to be 'mirroring'.

A related investigation can be made into studio set-up as embodying ideologies and replaying them. Almost any *Question Time*-type forum can be analysed in terms of seating spaces, camera angles, lighting, positioning of microphones. Students can discuss how far such programmes give 'the public' access to studios, questioning time etc, since for many, such televised confrontations seem to prove that democracy must always be a shambles – 'ordinary' people are inarticulate, selfish in debate, over-excitable, shout each other down An examination of access to the means of representation in the studio, as outlined above, suggests that the audience are literally set up to behave in this way, not as part of a conspiracy, but as a result of the working practices of TV. To emphasise the point, I've sometimes used a tape of the 'Bad News' discussion on *Man Alive*, and asked students to note how access to representation is distributed there. Though using an apparently similar studio set-up, the programme (important for the credibility of the BBC in answering a persistent group of critics), actually worked very differently. Each BBC/ITV person had access to a comfortable chair, space around it in which to be framed by the camera, access to a microphone which made his/her voice instantly audible instead of seeming to loom out of some barn, and access to books and papers if needed (on tables), as well as time in which to prepare questions and points. The effect was the reverse of the Robin Day set-up: instead of validating the experts, the programme made the 'Bad News' representatives look as though they were on trial.

Finally, we can teach about attitudes *to* TV, 'preferred readings' prepared for us by a whole number of well-positioned voices, the first of which, the continuity system between programmes, is significantly placed *inside* TV. Its primary function is clearly economic – to maximise audiences – and could be discussed together with scheduling. But it also works to frame assumptions, set agendas, limit meanings of particular programmes. Students might devise an evening's continuity scripts themselves ('the tragedy of Yosser'? 'the personal views' of Loach or Pilger?) or Cup Final pre-publicity could be investigated to see which meanings are being prepared – interest in Argentinian players during the South Atlantic war? 'Star' readings which then materially affect camera positions and movements? All this on one of TV's privileged sites as 'unmediated record'?

The more obvious 'preparations' of critics, from the *Sun* to the *Times*, of course, deserve attention, as does the positioning of the largest body of critics – the viewers – into a ten-minute programme like *Points of View*, with its peculiarly fluid address and various strategies of containment. This work, like that on censorship, is valuable in taking what seem simple, single operations – censoring, publicising – and showing them to be a proliferating range of different but related activities. Finally, the BBC and ITV yearbooks could be quoted to see how they then repeat the sneers and prize-givings of the accredited critics, a circling which helps materially to determine funding allocations, franchises, prestige areas in TV.

Teachers who will find it hard to secure curricular space for a general study of the TV institution might nevertheless use the approach in relation to areas of curricular respectability like news or science programmes. News simulations again can be skewed to enable an understanding of news as commodity. Starting with various myths of journalists – as blessed with 'news sense', a sort of magic nose that helps them detect stories 'out there' – we can emphasise instead news as a costly commodity (satellite costs, flying teams out for 'on the spot' reporting instead of using the agencies, etc) and therefore the attractions of predictable calendars of news events and coverage costed in advance. We can also suggest how news is determined by its destination, by being aimed at a particular time-slot, on a certain channel. If possible, a story could be followed through the day, from surfacing on Breakfast TV or radio, through to the prime-time 9 or 10 o'clock muscle-matches. Here, the prestige, 'serious' position allocated news in legislation, annual reports, franchise bids can be brought into play with the felt need to maximise audiences. The resulting blend of the 'entertaining' and 'serious' could open onto the impulse to narrativise news, which then moves in rhythm with the 'hero-villain-closure' mechanisms of classical narrative.¹⁹

Recent work on stereotyping and representation²⁰ might be opened towards TV via, for example, investigation of how science and scientists are represented²¹. Popular understandings, picked up from the repetitions of science-fiction, can be followed through into the assumptions of *Horizon*, or *Tomorrow's World*, programmes which, like sport, are seen as a last bastion of 'transparent', 'factual' TV. The institution approach would emphasise scheduling, costs, co-production deals and assumptions about audiences as determining the demonstrable differences between the two programmes, but would also indicate the generic limits of science on TV, so that the effects of a drug can be queried on *Horizon*, but manufacturers, if questioned at all, will appear in current affairs.

Representations of local or national groups can also be scrutinised via the institution. The image of Wales, for example, can be shown to be composed of particular, material representations, and to be articulated through institutionalised channels such as 'news sense'. Which stories, featured on 'local' TV news make it onto 'national'/London news, and why? How is the IBA demand for regional identities related to:

¹⁹See Cary Bazalgette and Richard Paterson, 'Real Entertainment: The Iranian Embassy Siege', *Screen Education* no 37, Winter 1980/81, pp 55-67; Richard Paterson and Philip Schlesinger, 'State Heroes for the Eighties', *Screen* May-June 1983, vol 24 no 3, pp 55-72; Tony Pearson, op cit; Philip Elliot, Graham Murdock and Philip Schlesinger, "'Terrorism" and the State: a Case Study of the Discourses of Television', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol 5 no 2, April 1983.

²⁰*Selling Pictures*, BFI Teaching Pack, 1983.

²¹See Carl Gardner and Robert Young, 'Science on TV: A Critique' in *Popular Television and Film*, Tony Bennett, Susan Boyd-Bowman, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott (eds), London, BFI in association with The Open University Press, 1981, pp 171-193.

1) dominant stereotypes of the region.

2) the disposition of franchise power *within* the area (eg the prosperous audience around Bristol and the resulting dispersal of resources in Harlech Television; the effect of the Welsh Fourth Channel on this dispersal).

3) the hegemony of certain regions over others via networking and scheduling practices. The frame of institution here might help locate 'different' images of Wales (or London) not as mere 'oddity', or part of a tolerant pluralism, but as struggling against the grain of material and ideological fundings. So the unfamiliarity of those 'other' images make it difficult for them to 'cash' the dividends of familiar stereotypes, recognitions, into nostalgia, or humour.

I'm aware that much needs to be done in schools and colleges simply to make available and accessible to hard-pressed teachers teaching materials, concepts, basic research resources and so on. I know, too, that this short piece has been able only to signal certain teaching possibilities. It would certainly benefit from precisely the flow of discussion practice around institution which it seeks to encourage. It may be objected that 'institution' will demand a relatively heavy input of direct information which many teachers would prefer to avoid. However, these concepts, this body of knowledge have *not* become embedded routines in education. They concern power, which usually interests students, and this interest shapes the flow of questions in the classroom rather differently than do 40 minutes of lip-service. Any teaching approach works to produce a sense of identity in its users/victims—as consumers, sensitive aesthetes, dumb operatives. This one might help students feel that though institutions like TV and school *do* operate according to very powerfully-lodged norms, we can keep alert for the production of contradiction as well as the reproduction of dominance. If we don't try to occupy teaching TV for the 'good sense' of a fully materialist approach, it will be taught, if at all, by the common sense of the 'new realism', only too happy (in the absence of other materials) to stick with texts, and maybe to cast the odd glance in the direction of a confirming con-text.

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